

SUFFIAN
HAKIM

HARRIS BIN POTTER

AND THE STONED
PHILOSOPHER



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PARODY
LAH!



"Laugh
until cry."

Gwee Li Sui,
author of
*Spiaking
Singlish*

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Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher

Suffian Hakim

ISBN: 978-981-48-4533-5

First edition, November 2019.

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An earlier version of Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher was originally published in 2015 by Suffian Hakim.

Illustrated edition. | Singapore : Epigram Books, 2019. Originally published: Suffian Hakim, 2015.

Illustrated by Muhammad Izdi

Cover design by Qin Yi

Published in Singapore by Epigram

www.epigrambooks.sg

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“Hilariously-written, completely Singaporean-sounding.”

Mothership

“Our favourite Harry Potter references are given a ridiculous local update.”

The Everyday People

“So disarmingly out of left-field that even Muggles—or should I say kosongs—will find lots to chuckle over.”

May Seah, *The Movie That No One Saw*

“Harris bin Potter lets every void-deck dwelling, soccer-playing, heartland-loving individual dive deeply into the lore of magic, mystery, mischief and mat-inspired magnificence. Suffian’s wit and ability to make readers (me at least) spit on a page laughing is so natural.”

Tim De Cotta, musician

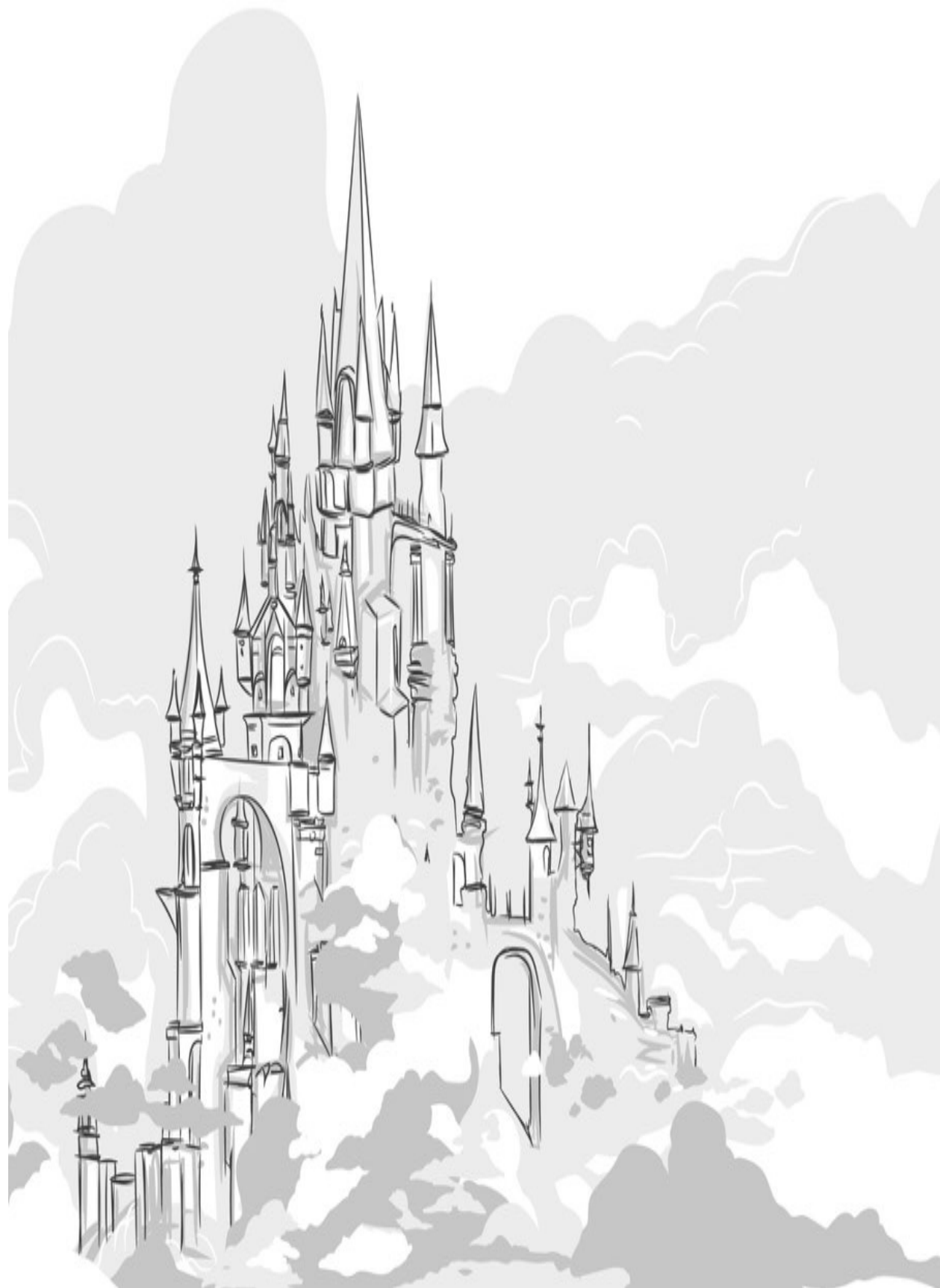
“I first picked up a copy of Harris Bin Potter just because it had a funny sort of title—its naming game continues throughout the book, with local and pop cultural references aplenty, bouncing off the Harry Potter universe. It reminded me of a book I read when I was young—Oh No, It’s the Kitchi Boy Gang!, which was one of my first encounters with local writing, packed with unique flavours that were never quite in the Hardy Boys or Three Investigators books. Given a chance, this new illustrated edition of Harris Bin Potter might conjure up the same magic for you!”

Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*

Also by Suffian Hakim

The Minorities

HARRIS BIN POTER AND THE STONED PHILOSOPHER



This
collocal
colokiehl
coloqueer
kolotoure
con los terroristas
colloquial
parody
is dedicated
to the memory of
Christopher Tulsidaz,
who never showed me
how to spell
but taught me
how to laugh.

Author's Note

Welcome back, dear reader, to Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher ! You hold in your hands the Epigram Books edition—a considerable upgrade from the self-published version that came out in 2014 and was reprinted in 2015 and 2016. In this edition, the prose flows more logically, the jokes have been updated and THERE. ARE. ILLUSTRATIONS.

For those of you who are reading Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher for the first time, welcome to the adventure! I promise it will be offbeat and zany. We'll prance on the line between the farcical and the satirical, and we'll question the deeper nature of said line. We'll even dip our toes into the surreal.

It feels like a thousand years ago that Harris bin Potter went viral and was shared on Facebook, forums and message boards, and through word of mouth. It feels like a thousand years ago that my blog stats exploded with over 50,000 unique visits. I don't even know 50,000 people in real life.

In actuality, it was ten years ago, in 2009, that a much younger me typed out the first two paragraphs of Harris bin Potter. Almost four years later, it became a book. Today, it is brought to you by one of Singapore's greatest publishers.

Writing Harris bin Potter has been one of the greatest blessings of my life for a few reasons:

1. It kickstarted my career as an author, something I am eternally grateful for.
2. Parodies are always fun to write. It is the literary equivalent of legally dancing around naked in someone else's house.
7. I'm really bad at counting and making lists so I don't have too many other options, career-wise.

At this point, I need to send my love to my editor Eldes Tran, without whom the book would have been a discordant mess. Thank you for your patience, warmth and intelligence. I hope my future books will give you less of a headache.

My gratitude also goes to Edmund Wee and the team at Epigram, for picking up an untested author's first attempt at a book and turning it into something much more magical.

Major love also to the brilliant Muhammad Izdi, who has wonderfully brought my imagination to life with his illustrations. I also need to send my love to the people who were there from the start of this endeavour. Marvin Miranda, Paul Twohill, Guy Vincent, Yusilawaty Yatiman, I would never have gotten here without your support and belief in those early days.

Last but not least, this goes to the love of my life, Shelby Sofya Segar, without whom this would all be for nothing.

But enough from me. Let's get into Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher.





Chapter 1: The Boy Who Tak Mati, Siol!

Pandir and Petom Palliteration of Block 222, Tampines Street 24, were proud to say that they wanted ten super jumbo triple cheeseburger meals—change the Coke to iced Milo—thank you very much. “And a salad,” Petom added to the bespectacled teenager serving them at the MatSedap counter.

The Palliterations were the kind of people who had a healthy attitude towards overeating because it proved to others that they had the money to overeat.

And the money to overeat they had. The Palliterations weren’t member-of-Parliament rich. If one were to describe them as Crazy Rich Asians, one would only be two-thirds correct. They were nevertheless able to afford more creature comforts than most, for Pandir was the CEO of a moderately successful drill manufacturing company called The Drill Sergeants Private Limited. As a company name, it was catchier than, say, Grunnings, which is a fictional British drill manufacturing firm. It was by far a better name than that of a training consultancy for housewife-entrepreneurs called We Drill Your Wives’ Private Limited, which was often misconstrued to be a support group for housewives looking for more excitement in their lives.

The teenaged MatSedap employee blinked at the Palliterations. He considered Pandir: big, beefy, with hardly any neck—a polite way of describing a man who was so fat, the teen’s colleague at the next cash register was momentarily confused as to who was supposed to serve Mr Palliteration when the rotund man waddled to the front of the queue. Pandir was wearing a black shirt, its seams straining and its buttons almost snapping off the thread, with a gaudy dragon motif sewn in glittering gold over his right breast. Because of how the shirt stretched against Pandir’s form, the dragon’s eyes were widened into shock and disbelief, giving the overall effect of a once-opulent beast being slowly swallowed by a supermassive black hole. Petom, on the other hand, dressed in a sky-blue, lacy “simple evening gown made by French hands”—her words—and was tall and skinny, with a long face stretched by her perpetual disdain for all things. Some of their neighbours would describe her as having a “horse face”, something both Petom and horses as a species did not appreciate.

The teenager said to the couple, “Don’t mind, but, can I ask—are all these meals just for the both of you?”

Pandir leaned over the counter—it creaked from the pressure—and peered contemptuously at the boy, scanning from his barely held-together smile to the green-and-black MatSedap name tag above his breast pocket that said, “Ian Tai”.

“Look here, Lantai,” Pandir said, jabbing a pudgy finger at the boy.

“It’s Ian, sir, with an I—”

“Don’t interrupt me!”

Ian cowered slightly. He felt floored, especially at being called Lantai. This man was so huge, he must have been the love child of an elephant and a steamroller, something both steamrollers and elephants as a species did not appreciate. He stammered his apology.

“Yes, all these meals are for us,” Pandir declared proudly, smiling with morbid glee at the boy’s fearful visage. “Now, stop wasting our time and get us our food, Lantai!”

Ian stammered the order into his microphone. His voice echoed in the kitchen behind him. Moments later, the kitchen door swung open and a frazzled man wearing a hairnet and a MatSedap apron stood there, wide-eyed and wider mouthed.

“You’re joking, right?” the incredulous cook asked Ian.

Ian shook his head.

The cook’s eyes darted from Ian to Pandir, to Pandir’s numerous chins and immense belly. “You know, diabetes is the number one—”

“GET ME MY FOOD, OR I WILL EAT ALL OF YOU!”

Because they believed him, the MatSedap workers scurried to prepare the ten super jumbo triple cheeseburger meals—

“And don’t forget my salad!” Petom’s shrill voice cut through the air like a knife

through a cow.

“Yes, sir. Yes, ma’am,” said Ian, thinking that these might actually be his final words. Hoping to appease the large man, he stuttered, “If—if you’d like, we still have our National Day special: the Merlion upsize. It upgrades your super jumbo meals to Merlion size, and your iced Milos to Milo Dinosaurs.”

Pandir’s large stomach gave a repulsive growl. He said gruffly, “Good. Give me that.”

Then: “Wait! What, in the name of Lee Kuan Yew’s unshaved leg hair, is a Milo Dinosaur?”

“It’s a larger cup of iced Milo topped with a generous serving of Milo powder,” Ian replied.

Petom mouthed Ian’s response to herself silently, her long face twisting in concentration and the realisation that, in the MatSedap employee’s description, there was no mention of—“Where’s the dinosaur?”

“Are you really asking— No, ma’am, there’s no actual—”

Her husband chimed in, “And which dinosaur is it? Because if it’s a T-Rex I expect a very large cup.”

“There’s no actual dinosaur in the drink. They’ve been extinct for a long time now, ma’am.”

Petom wore a characteristic frown. “Is it dinosaur flavoured?”

Ian opened his mouth, but could not find the words to express his astonishment at the utter stupidity of the couple before him. “What do you mean?” he mustered.

“You know, like Pink Dolphin,” Pandir said in support of his wife. “It’s dolphin flavoured.”

“Yes, exactly,” Petom said, nodding, while Ian Tai made a mental note to submit this encounter to ServiceIndustryNightmareStories.com later. “Is this Milo dinosaur flavoured?”

“HOW CAN ANYTHING BE DINOS—” The MatSedap employee stopped and steadied himself and cleared his throat. “No, ma’am. It is completely Milo flavoured. No dinosaurs were harmed in the making of this drink.”

“Good,” Petom said imperiously. “I don’t want one of those prissy vegan brats breathing down my neck.”

Pandir, however, was still unconvinced about the appeal of Milo Dinosaur. “So let me get this right,” he said, as the people in the queue behind him began muttering irritably. “There’s Milo powder on top of a large Milo? It sounds like a large, very diluted, very tasteless Milo with undissolved powder that you lot didn’t stir properly.”

Ian Tai, of course, denied this, and explained that it was a well-mixed Milo, with extra powder to top it. Perhaps it was to offer a variety in textures, he offered.

“Maybe that’s why they call it a Milo Dinosaur,” said Petom thoughtfully—which is to say, “full of thought”, and not “thinking of others”, for she had clearly refused to listen to her server. “Because dinosaurs don’t stir. Have you seen a T-Rex’s hands?” She brought her arms close to her body so all that stuck out were claw-like hands. She mimicked picking up a spoon with her claw-hands, then she mimicked an inability to hold on to said hypothetical spoon.

“What are you doing, ma’am?”

“Trying to pick up a spoon as a T-Rex.”

Noticing the obviously annoyed queue behind Pandir and Petom, Ian said quickly, “So that’ll be ten Merlion meals—and a salad—and, um, your drinks will be...Pepsi?”

Pandir paused. He parted his lips to answer, but snapped them back shut in the realisation that, in the course of discussing the nature of a Milo Dinosaur, his mouth had begun watering. He swallowed. Then he opened his mouth again, causing a renegade strand of spittle to reach for the floor. He caught it with his hand and wiped it on the counter, saying, “We’ll have the Milo Dinosaurs.”

“A good choice, sir,” Ian said with a forced, courteous smile. He also made a mental note to sterilise the counter with industry-grade surface cleaner and fire, possibly.

The Palliterations took six trips to carry their food from the counter, ignoring the glares and irritated mutters of the queue they had held up, to their table in a secluded corner of the restaurant—“far away from the smelly common folk”, as Petom described it.

Over their mountain of food and solitary salad, husband and wife conversed happily. They spoke to each other of their love; they discussed popular television shows they watched, such as Singapore Idol and Survivor, though they’d lost track of which sun-drenched island the latter reality show was currently on. They also spoke lovingly of their infant son.

Two Novembers ago, Petom gave birth to a healthy seven-kilogram baby boy. They named their son Dada—not after the Malay word for “chest”, or the baby word for “daddy”, but after Pandir’s favourite art movement. Initially, Pandir had wanted to name him Dumbass (pronounced Dee-yoom-bays), which he believed sounded “exotically Scandinavian”. Petom vetoed it with the screams of a woman who had gone through four hours of labour to find out that her son was named Dumbass.

In any case, Petom found that she liked the name Dada, and was especially relieved that her husband’s favourite art movement hadn’t been SoFlo Superflat or Faeces Mural.

Petom and Pandir deeply loved Dada and in their opinion, he was the finest boy in all of Singapore. It was a strange way to describe a baby who hadn’t even turned one. Most people would describe their babies as “the cutest” or “the most adorable”. “Finest” was used to describe furniture or truffles or public train systems.

The Palliterations had a lot to be proud of, other than their vocabulary. But they did have one shameful secret. No, wait—six. They had six shameful secrets. One of them was the bin Potters.

Lalang bin Potter was Petom’s sister and only remaining family. Despite this, Petom wanted the bin Potters to represent her family like the Central Narcotics Bureau want Willie Nelson to represent it.

The bin Potters also had an infant son, named Harris. Typical was what Petom spitefully thought of her nephew’s name. No way in hell was what she thought of Dada spending time with this Harris character. Italics was what she thought

people from Italy were called.

Presently, Petom took two small forkfuls of salad before disdainfully pushing the plate away. She then gestured to a MatSedap cleaner, and told the frail old man to throw it away.

“Please, ma’am,” the cleaner croaked, “this is such a waste of perfectly decent food.” His voice softened. “Think of the kids in Africa who are starving and have never eaten a salad.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, old man,” said Petom shrilly, “but I am thinking of those goddamn kids. I’m thinking, it’s probably those kids in Africa who made this salad because only people who have never had a salad can make one this horrendous.” She passed the plate to the cleaner, and made a disgusted face as she did so. “Take it away from me now!”

After Petom finished her quarter-of-a-meal and Pandir finished his ten, they took a half-minute taxi ride back to their flat at Block 222, Tampines Street 24. At the lift landing, husband and wife parted ways. Pandir went towards the mailboxes, while Petom headed on upstairs to their flat on the thirteenth floor to check on Dada and their babysitter.

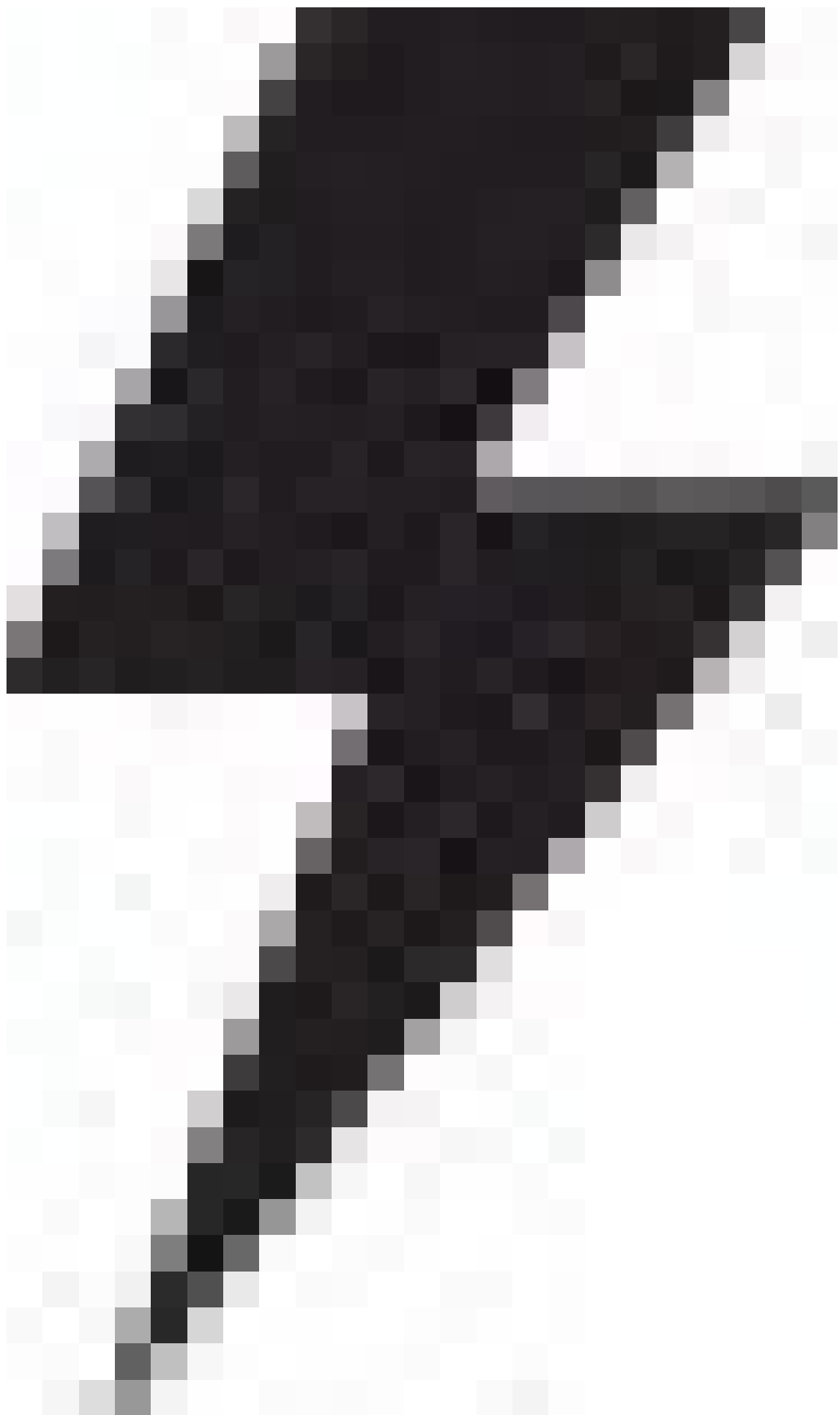
Pandir had almost reached the mailboxes when a sharp glint of light from the opposite block caught his eye. He turned to look, and realised it wasn’t exactly a glint of light. It was a rather peculiar rainbow, and it was peculiar for three reasons. For one, it was night-time. Furthermore, it wasn’t bowed as rainbows were named to be; this one was straight, but a “rainstraight” just sounded stupid. Also, it wasn’t in the sky—this rainbow streaked across the empty void deck in the opposite block.

Pandir shook his head. Maybe he shouldn’t have eaten ten meals. His head was never right when he was underfed. He opened the mailbox, grabbed the stack of letters inside, locked the box and headed upstairs.

Back in his apartment, Pandir paid the babysitter, kissed his sleeping infant son and took a shower. When he stepped out of the shower, he found his wife on the phone, crying.

“B-Blow-Blown up? What do you mean the bin Potters were blown up?” she sobbed into the phone.

Pandir put a large arm around her shoulder, and held her close. As his wife would tell him after she hung up, Petom's sister and her sister's husband had been brutally murdered by one of their kind, and baby Harris would be left in the care of his only remaining family—the Palliterations. Despite the awful news, Pandir thought it was commendable that they were duly informed. They could have, instead, found the baby left rudely at their doorstep, with merely a perfunctory letter to explain who he was.



At the empty, dim void deck of Block 222, Tampines Street 24, midnight had taken over.

And then there were footsteps.

They grew steadily louder. They were quick, sprightly, like those of a gleefully hopping child. A long shadow stretched over the void deck, as a tall figure stepped under the lights.

It was revealed to be an old man wearing what appeared to be purple pyjama robes and vintage fuchsia cowboy boots. His complexion was heavily tanned and wrinkled, like a corduroy potato—a corduroy potato with a deep forehead and a pair of thick star-shaped glasses perched atop a rather pronounced nose. And then there was the beard—as white as the midnight sky was black—and so long that he had to tuck it into his belt. Under the illumination of the void deck lights, the man looked positively ancient. He skipped along the concrete, a rather alarming sight, especially of someone with that much white beard and whose legs looked as though someone had thrown skin over a pair of chopsticks. This was Professor Airbus Dinosaur, known to his enemies as “

Argh No Not You Again

”; to passers-by as “That Old Man, I Bet You My CPF Money He’s on Cocaine”; and to his friends, students and colleagues as “Pakcik Dollah”.

There was a soft mewl near his feet. Pakcik Dollah looked down to see a dark tabby cat pressing its body up against his boots. “Professor Munira McGonnercall! Fancy seeing you here!”

“Well, of course,” said what used to be the cat. In its place was now a beautiful elderly Indian woman in a saree, tall and thin, severe and erudite. It became clearer that, with her human form more realised, the woman had been speaking rather sadly. “I’d rather be here than...out there.”

“Out there celebrating?” Pakcik Dollah asked the former cat. “And you should be. We’ve had very little to celebrate over the past ten years.”

“I cannot,” sobbed Munira. “Not after what happened to Lalang and Jamal! Do the Palliterations know we’re coming?”

Pakcik Dollah nodded. “I called them earlier to inform them. I was thinking of just leaving baby Harris at their doorstep with a letter, but come on, who does that?”

The former cat smiled rather sadly, and several moments of silence passed between them, in which Munira was very obviously trying to maintain her composure. Then, a sad mewl escaped her lips. “Oh, Pakcik Dollah! Jamal and Lalang! They were the best of us!”

“I know, dear,” said Pakcik Dollah, patting her shoulder.

“We did everything we could to protect them! And yet...that bastard...”

Pakcik Dollah sighed. “Well, not everything. If we had really wanted to protect them, we’d have pressed on with Seriously Black’s idea to send them to the Bahamas.”

“We did! I don’t know how many times I’ve asked him to leave Singapore! Oh, how I miss that stubborn man! He insisted on staying, said he didn’t want to leave the fight against...That-Evil-Bastard-Lah-You-Should-Know-Who-I’m-Talking-About.”

“He was torn, Munira.”

She made a sound that was part gasp, part howl.

“No, no, no, not literally,” Pakcik Dollah said quickly. “I meant he was seriously considering going away, to keep little Harris safe. But Jamal knew that if he and Lalang left, there would be many on our side who would question whether...”

“Whether?”

“Whether we could win this war.”

“I was thankful they didn’t leave us, but now...”

“To be honest, there’s a small part of me that’s thankful they hadn’t gone to the

Bahamas,” Pakcik Dollah said. “The whether would be horrible this time of year.”

“Did you say weather or whether?”

“Whether, obviously.”

“Do you know how they died, Pakcik Dollah? Was it Avada Kedavra?”

“Avada Kedavra? No! What kind of stupid-sounding spell is that?” Pakcik Dollah’s tone then darkened. “I believe it was Chan Mali Chan.”

The professor gasped. There were no spells in the history of magic and magical people more abhorrent and repulsive than Chan Mali Chan. The gasp became sobs, and the sobs became wails that howled into the night.

But Pakcik Dollah was waving urgently for her to stop crying.

Munira stopped and both professors strained their ears. At first, only the great disquietude of midnight presided.

Then, footsteps.

Unlike Pakcik Dollah’s, these were loud, booming, as though this person were wearing boots made of bricks. Then he appeared: giant, hulking, a bulldozer of a man.

Munira McPanadol rushed to the newcomer and reached up to hug him around his waist. “Oh, Hamid!”

Some who knew Hamid claimed that he was half giant, that his mother was a giantess while his father was human. This was not true, as both his parents were human beings who merely possessed the genetic disposition to produce extremely sizeable offspring. Neither were giants. Had this claim been true, it would beg the wrong kind of questions about the mechanics of sexual intercourse between the couple.

Munira broke the hug and noticed, finally, the small blue bundle of cloth in Hamid’s large, muscular, probably weaponisable arms. “Is that him?”

They all stared at the bundle. Small cries emanated from it.

“Well, of course it’s ’im! I just came from the bin Potters’ ’ome. What else could I be carryin’? Ruddy box sets of young adult magical fantasy books?” He exchanged looks with the professors. “Aye, I’m bloody sorreh. I’m just a wee bit down.”

“A wee bit?” Munira held Hamid in her gaze. “And Hamid, why are you speaking with that accent?”

“Chan Mali Chan is a more sinistah spell than we expected, mon!” said Hamid, now in a Jamaican accent. He obviously wanted to say more, but he began sobbing in great heaves. “Oh, Jamal and Lalang. It was not their time.”

“Hamid, what did Chan Mali Chan do to you?”

“It don’t matter,” said Hamid, shaking his head. “I’ll be fine. And more importantly, so is lil’ Harris.” He parted the blue blanket in his hands to reveal a baby boy, his eyes closed in slumber. On the left side of his forehead was a peculiar scar.

The three adults looked lovingly upon the sleeping baby in Hamid’s arms.

“He’s beautiful,” Munira cooed.

Gently, Hamid passed Harris to Pakcik Dollah, who regarded the boy for a long while. Worry, relief and fear were intermingled in the old man’s face. Here was a child whose parents had passed mere hours ago, who had survived the gruesome attack on them unscathed, save for the scar.

Professor Munira McConnagall leaned in to kiss baby Harris on his forehead, her eyes red as she fought back tears. “I could take care of him, love him,” she said pleadingly. “We don’t have to give him away. I’ve heard Jamal and Lalang talk about these kosongs. They’re responsible for half of MatSedap’s revenue!”

“You know this is for the best, Munira,” Pakcik Dollah said gently. “Say your goodbyes for now.” Both Munira and Hamid planted kisses on the baby. Pakcik Dollah then turned and made his way towards the lifts.

With Harris secure in his arms, he took the lift up to the thirteenth floor, and

knocked on Pandir and Petom's door.

Meanwhile, far away, in a hidden, secret, magical place not at Tampines, Singapore's witches and wizards gathered. They were celebrating the triumph and survival of their community. They were celebrating their lives. Most of all, they were celebrating the baby boy who made that evening possible.

They raised their glasses of Milo Dinosaurs in the night and shouted with joy, "To the boy who tak mati, siol!"

YOU CAN'T SPELL 'KOTAK'
WITHOUT 'OTAK'!



Chapter 2: The Bizarre Night Bazaar

Harris bin Potter was not your average boy.

For one, he was an orphan. His parents had died of very bad food poisoning when he was barely a year old. At least, that was what his aunt, Cik Petom, told him.

“It was very bad satay from Johor,” she had told Harris when she felt he was old enough to hear it. He was four. “Tak sedap lah! Tasted like pantat!”¹

When young Harris heard this, he wondered two things: one, how Cik Petom even knew what pantat tasted like, and two, why she hadn’t dropped dead when she too had eaten that infernal satay.

It had been ten years since his aunt and uncle received him from a peculiar old man in purple pyjama robes and fuchsia cowboy boots. Since then, Harris had been under their care. In actuality, “under their care” is a grossly inaccurate statement. More often than not, he was under their son, Dada, because, firstly, nobody likes to be sat on, and secondly, because eleven-year-old Dada weighed a hundred kilos.

When Dada was not bullying Harris (treating his cousin like his personal armchair was merely one of many ways he pushed Harris around at home), the poor orphan was mistreated by his aunt and uncle. They spoke rudely to him, they prohibited him from reading books or watching television, and they forced him to do all the household chores, on threat of not feeding him. For a boy of eleven years, in an age of PlayStation 4 and Netflix, this was a foul, miserable existence.

To make matters worse, his aunt and uncle housed him in abject conditions.

“Yes, yes,” one might say in exasperation. “He lives in a cupboard under the stairs. We’ve read the British original.”

But if one did, one might be surprised to learn that Harris bin Potter was an

abused child in an HDB flat in Singapore, whose lot in life was a lot worse than his British counterpart's. It was decidedly worse than his Japanese counterpart's, Harishitame Pota-San, who went to Magic Ninja school and ate a lot of sashimi. It was infinitely much worse than his Norwegian counterpart's, Harrison Fjord Pottersson, who enjoyed world-class childcare services and who was so well-liked, he could be a smuggler and everyone would love him nevertheless.

As for Harris bin Potter, he did not even enjoy a spacious cupboard underneath the stairs like his British counterpart. Instead, his bedroom was the old, grimy kitchen sink cabinet that seemed to grow smaller and smaller with each passing year.

Inside the unlit kitchen sink cabinet, Harris often confronted his darkest thoughts. Who were my parents, really? How did they die that Cik Petom had to lie about it? Why did the chicken cross the road?

And, as he touched his forehead: How did I get this scar?

Harris had a curious S-shaped scar on his forehead. Those who saw it would describe it as "lightning shaped", which made Harris suspect that people tended to describe things as they appeared in cartoons. For example, most things that are described as heart-shaped really aren't and only appeared as such in cartoons, as any surgeon or person with a realistic grasp of the human anatomy could tell you. Similarly, actual lightning was a haphazard, indiscriminate phenomenon with no definitive shape. What Harris had on his forehead was a jagged S-shaped scar. When he asked his relatives about how he got it, he would receive vague, dismissive answers such as Uncle Pandir's "Oh, because you got to the other side".

But more than that, Harris bin Potter was special. And it wasn't because of the time Dada brought him along for void deck football, when he found that he was a natural at the game. And it wasn't that when Dada made him do his homework for him, Harris found that he was a natural at Mathematics. It was neither of those things. Harris could do things—things he could not explain.

The first time one of those things happened it was a cool November morning. Uncle Pandir and Cik Petom were out grocery shopping, which, considering the combined appetites of Uncle Pandir and Dada, would take them a very long time. Dada was sitting in the living room on the parquet floor of the

Palliterations' Tampines flat, a gleaming new iPad in his pudgy hands. He was on a quiz website called Pegging Your Self-Identity and Sense of Self-Worth to Pop Culture Analogies Is Surely Healthy, or pysstopcanalish.com. The quiz he was currently working on was, "Which Harry Potter Character Are You?"

Harris was seated next to his cousin, his hands freshly dried and smelling of soap having just completed his chores for the morning. "What are you doing there?"

"It's none of your business, orphan," Dada replied contemptuously, almost as if he was blaming Harris for his tragic lack of parents.

"Oh, come on, Dada! I'm bored."

Dada made a sound that was somewhere in the middle of a grunt, a groan and a squeal of annoyance. Nevertheless, he shifted the tablet so his cousin could see its screen clearly as well. "Fine. I'm taking a personality quiz. This one tells me which Harry Potter character I'm most like."

"You don't need to take a personality quiz, Dada! Your personality is already very obvious."

"What do you mean by that?" Dada glared dangerously at his cousin.

"You know," Harris began, taking in his cousin's bulging T-shirt. "It's obvious you are full of personality. You don't need a website to tell you that."

"I WILL DO THE PERSONALITY QUIZ, SO SHUT YOUR MOUTH!"

"Okay, relax! I was just saying. Let's get to it, shall we?"

Dada's fingers tapped on the iPad, and a series of sans serif fonts in white, materialised on the screen.

"Okay, question one: What is your favourite subject?" Harris read for his cousin.

"That's easy. Eating."

Harris read through the options. "Eating" was not one of them. "You have to choose something else."

“NO, I WANT EATING!” Dada roared. “MY FAVOURITE SUBJECT IS EATING!”

“I don’t deny that,” Harris said in a calm, patient voice, for an unagitated Dada tended not to sit on him. He pointed at the screen. “But it’s not one of the options they provided. There’s Language, PE, Mathematics, Science, History, Skipping School...”

“Then I choose Mathematics,” Dada declared with the confidence of somebody who’s been told many times that he’s “Mummy’s special little pookie poo schnoogams”. “Because seven ate nine and I’m seven years old!”

“You’re eleven years old, Dada,” Harris said with practised patience.

“Fine, then. Eleven ate nine! One, two, three, four, five, six, eleven, eight, nine, onety!”

“Do you mean ten?”

“ELEVEN ATE NINE,” Dada screamed. “ONETY!”

“Okay, okay, let’s tap on ‘Mathematics’.” They did.

The second question popped up and Harris read, “What is your biggest fear? Option one: Fear itself. Option two: Spiders. Option three: Ghosts. Option four: Your grandmother. Option five—”

“I fear nothing, Harris. Ghosts come to me, and I go, ‘Boo!’ and they get scared and they pee ghost pee and they run to their ghost mummies.”

“Shall we go with ‘fear itself’ then?”

“You are not listening, bodoh! I fear nothing! And how can anybody be afraid of fear? That’s like asking water to drink water.”

“I think some famous person said it, to fear nothing but fear itself.”

“It must be a bodoh famous person then. What are the remaining options?”

“Well, option five is cockroaches. Option six is love and commitment.”

“I don’t fear any of those things,” said Dada. “Oh we’ll just go with option one.”

And so the two cousins went on with the quiz—Harris read out the questions while Dada furnished his answers after some rather blundering deliberations.

“What kind of wand would you choose?”

“Bengawand Solo.”²

“What would you usually be doing at a party?”

“Eating all the food.”

“Which among these inspirational figures is your hero?”

“Hitler.”

“What kind of poetry do you like?”

“Vogon.”

At the end of the quiz, Harris tapped “Submit”. Moments later, a pop-up window revealed: “You are Grawp, giant and half-brother to Hagrid, which means this elaboration doesn’t really matter because Grawp cannot read.”

“GRAWP? They gave me Grawp?”

“You’re a giant,” Harris said soothingly. “That’s pretty awesome.”

“No, it’s not!” Dada roared, standing up. He then huffed and puffed like an indecently obese big bad wolf. “Giants are stupid and ugly and fall down when their legs get tied together!”

“Let me try,” said Harris, refreshing the website.

After about five minutes of answering the quiz as truthfully as he could, and five minutes of Dada pacing, by way of stomping back and forth like an ogre waiting for Keeping Up With the Kardashians to come on, Harris tapped “Submit”.

No pop-up window popped up.

Harris hit “Submit” again.

Again, nothing happened. No “loading” icon, no “error” message—nothing.

“What happened?” asked Dada. “Did you ruin my iPad?”

“No!” Harris tried to submit one more time, and nothing happened.

Then a message materialised: “Dear user, We’ve calculated your answer to be ‘Harry Potter’ but the act of revealing that information to you will tear asunder the very fabric of space-time. It will cause major fractures in the canon–reality continuum, and our very universe might cease to exist.” The eleven-year-olds weren’t sure what all that meant exactly, but before they could reread the text, a spark erupted from the corner of the iPad.

Then, another spark, cackling in the screen. Harris got up and backed away from the iPad.

There was a whimper from Dada.

There were more sparks, and the iPad burst into flames.

“DADDY! MUMMY!” Dada screamed. However, barring the accidental consumption of an irradiated banana that could give them superhuman hearing, there was no way Uncle Pandir and Cik Petom could hear their son from the supermarket six blocks away. Indeed, Dada screamed fruitlessly.

“I’m going to, uh, help, by, uhh, getting the fire extinguisher in the kitchen!” Dada said anxiously. He waddled towards the kitchen, squealing.

The acrid smell of melting plastic filled the air. Harris was starting to panic. The fire itself was manageable—he feared the punishment from his aunt and uncle for the scorched carpet and for endangering Dada.

He remembered when Dada accidentally broke three of Cik Petom’s favourite vases the year before in an attempt to prove that he could juggle vases, and put the blame on Harris. Of course, Harris denied this when his aunt and uncle berated him for it, but Petom had a natural inclination to believe her son over the nephew she had to play unwilling guardian to. Harris was locked inside the kitchen sink cabinet for three entire days. The Palliterations left him a bottle of

water and a large, half-full tin of biscuits for sustenance. After those three days, the tin of biscuits was half-empty.

The memory of those three days washed over Harris, immobilising him. He closed his eyes, and wished upon wish, hoped upon hope that the fire had never happened.

When he opened his eyes, the fire had died, the scorch marks on the carpet had disappeared and the iPad appeared unscathed.

Harris adjusted his spectacles.

To Harris bin Potter, there was a cause to every effect; there was a logical explanation for everything. If Dada hit him hard, it would hurt where he was hit. If he did not do the dishes, he would be forced to eat only leftovers—considering the combined appetites of Uncle Pandir and Dada, it was never much. If he broke one of Cik Petom's vases, he wouldn't be allowed to leave the kitchen sink cabinet for a day. If Dada broke one of Cik Petom's vases, he'd be banished to the sink cabinet for a day as well.

On that day, however, there were three events that begged logic like a snowman begs for Singaporean weather. The first was the mysterious fire that was not. The second was Dada coming back from the kitchen wearing a clear raincoat and holding a fire shield fashioned from the black plastic lid of the rubbish bin and a bag of what looked like condoms filled with water.

"Harris, you're going to have to put out the fire," Dada squeaked, as he held out a clear, dripping, water-filled condom.

"I've put out the fire already," Harris said quickly.

Dada was astonished to find no burn marks on the carpet or his iPad.

For the first time in his short life, in a situation that did not require reading, Harris heard his cousin's voice falter with apprehension. "Harris, how— What did you do?"

Harris did not know what to say.

When Uncle Pandir and Cik Petom returned later, Dada, having disposed of his

Dadaist firefighting costume, rushed to them, yelling, “DADDY! MUMMY! Harris did something weird!”

“What did you do, boy?” Pandir asked threateningly, scanning his house for signs of mischief, signs of the M word.

“Nothing!” he stuttered. Harris himself was still trying to come to terms with the events of that day.

“My new iPad! He did something to it!”

Pandir picked up the silver thing, and studied it. He then pushed the power button. The screen came to life. He then tapped the Plants Versus Zombies icon. The game came on without a hitch and Pandir planted fireball-spouting plants to viciously mow down wave after wave of the pixelated undead. He seemed tense doing so, as though expecting something unexpected to happen. When nothing unexpected unexpectedly happened, he visibly relaxed. “What did you do to the iPad?” he asked Harris again.

“It was on fire, then it wasn’t!” said Dada from behind his mother.

“It looks fine to me,” Pandir said, confusion creeping into his stern expression. “No burn marks, nothing.”

“I want a new iPad! I don’t want that one anymore!”

“But Dada,” said Cik Petom. “We just bought this one for you.”

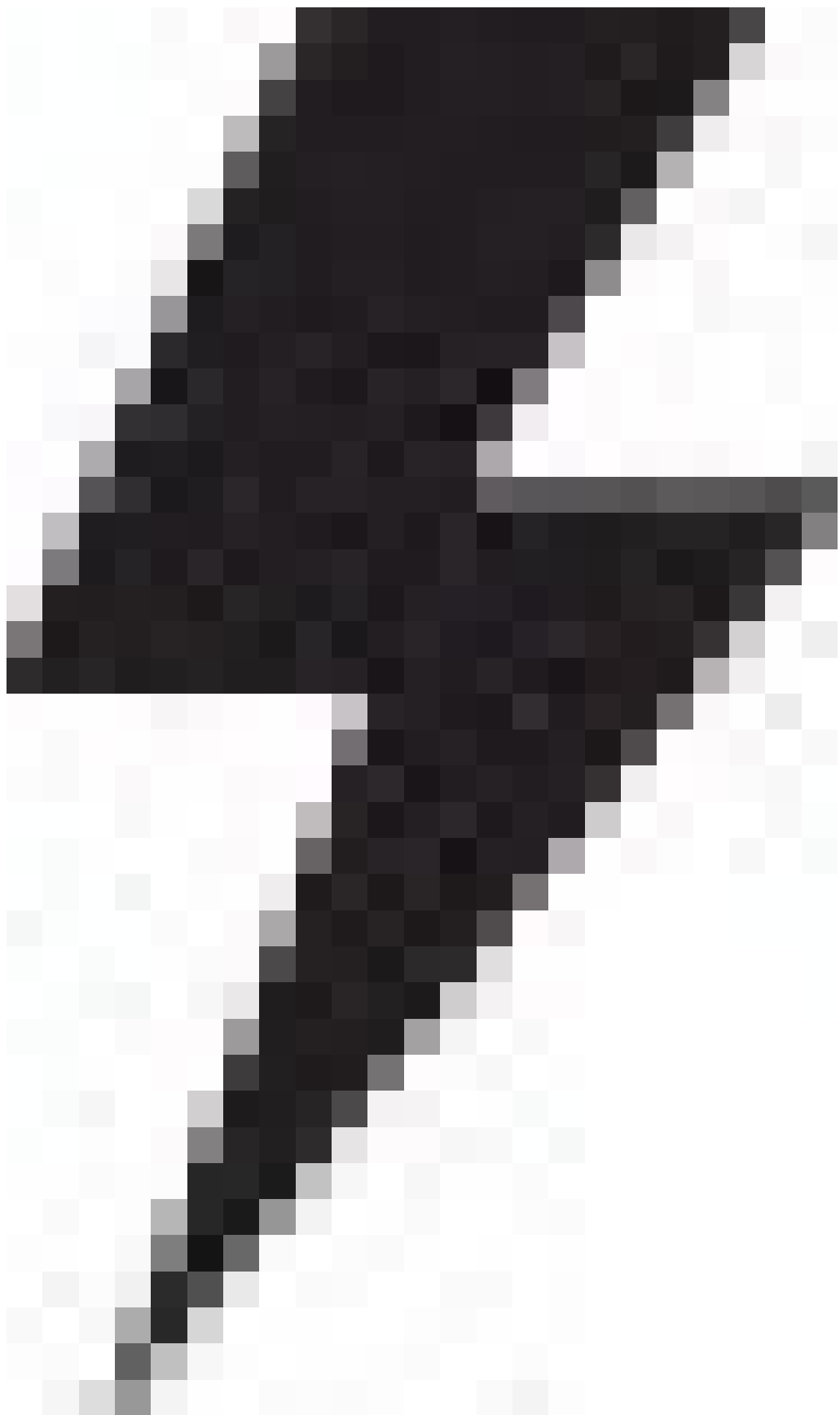
Uncle Pandir chuckled when his wife looked imploringly at him. “Ah, that’s my little go-getter,” he said, ruffling his son’s hair. Harris relaxed and could feel his insides unknotting. “How about a Ramly burger instead?”

Dada shook his head petulantly.

“How about six Ramly burgers?”

Dada harrumphed. “Fine.”

“To the pasar malam it is then!” cried Uncle Pandir.



The most popular stall at any given pasar malam served the best Ramly burgers. To most, Ramly burgers are what humans were born to eat—exquisitely tender or gloriously crunchy meat patties (depending on how the consumer liked it) richly flavoured with spices. To others...well, those others are probably vegetarians, or dead.

After a short drive of three minutes,³ Uncle Pandir parked in the car park behind the pasar malam. The Palliterations, with Harris trailing behind, walked past stalls that sold jeans, curtains, lava lamps, furniture and outrageous novelty items. One stall even sold timeshares.

It wasn't long before they came to a smoky stall with a transparent Plexiglas food display, a portable burger grill and a snaking queue that stretched the length of more than five stalls. Of all these clues, it was the queue that told them this was the Ramly burger stall.

Uncle Pandir rushed to the front of the queue and squeezed himself between the first and second person—it was quite a sight, given his very large frame, like looking at a walrus trying to do ballet. The man behind Uncle Pandir threw him a dirty look while disgruntled, grumbling groans were generally directed at the Palliteration patriarch from the rest in the queue.

Uncle Pandir turned to them and asked, “Do you know who I am?”

The man behind him looked at his face, and replied, “No.”

“Good,” said Uncle Pandir. By then, the lady at the front of the queue had already picked up her food and was turning to leave.

As Uncle Pandir ordered nine Ramly burgers, he pulled Harris close and told his nephew to wait at the garbage disposal area behind the stall. “I don't need you lurking around here looking like I don't feed you.”

“You don't,” Harris said flatly. “Only Cik Petom—”

“That'll be enough from you, boy! Go!”

Harris went. The respite of a garbage disposal area, out of sight of his relatives, sounded thoroughly appealing.

Behind the stalls and away from the rampage conditions, the lights of the pasar malam was less glaring. The sounds seemed muted, as if Harris were listening from underwater. The garbage disposal itself wasn't as bad as he feared. There was no stench of pasar malam waste. There was only a pile of discarded boxes.

Then he heard it; the last thing he expected to hear out there among the boxes.

“Fuck.”

It came from an almost inhuman voice, gravelly and inorganic, but not enough for the obvious anxiety in that singular word to be lost to the wind.

“Hello?” Harris called.

“They can't just leave me here!” the voice continued, clearly incensed. “I used to mean something! I would help carry things around for people.”

Then came a second voice, this one ponderous and clear, a voice of some intellect. “That's life, my friend. One day you're useful, the next day you're fertiliser. And don't get me started on recycling! I have a friend who's now a pamphlet advertising sex toys! Sex toys! Someone put ink on him to illustrate a dildo!”

“Is someone there?” Harris called. “Hello?”

“Oh, sweet god of paper! Is that kid talking to us?” asked the first voice, the gravel now peppered with apprehension.

“I think he is,” said a new voice—this one feminine and friendly. “Hello there! If you can hear me, say...what should I make him say?”

“Cogito ergo sum!”⁴ whispered the voice whose friend is now, inexorably, a... pamphlet?

“Shout cogito er—what?”

“Cogito ergo sum!” Harris said loudly into the dark.

Suddenly, there was a chorus of voices.

“Oh my god!”

“Finally!”

“No way!”

“I haven’t met one in ages!”

“Are you sure he’s human?”

Harris’ immediate surroundings were still and devoid of people, which was strange considering the vocal uproar. “Where are you?” he asked.

“We’re right in front of you!”

“I can’t see anything! Are you ghosts?”

“No! We’re right here!” said the gravelly voice.

Harris made his way towards the origin of the voices, and he found himself walking to the stack of boxes.

“Are you—”

“Yes!”

“Talking boxes?”

There was another chorus of voices. This one wasn’t the flourish of excitement that previously rose. In fact, this one was steeped in affront.

“Oh my god!”

“Did he just call us that?”

“He did not just call us that!”

“Twitter will know of this!”

“Only we can call ourselves that word, boy,” admonished the voice of intellect.

“What word?” asked Harris. “Box?”

“He did not just do it again!”

“Ignorant! Ignorant!”

“You racist!”

“Why, I would have a boxing match with you, if I could only move.”

“I’m sorry,” Harris said quickly, apologetically. “I really didn’t know.”

“Don’t do it again,” said the voice of intellect. “We are parcels. Not the B-word. We didn’t slave to help humanity store their things to be called that.”

“I truly am sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“What’s your name?” asked the one with the feminine voice.

“Harris. Harris bin Potter. I truly am sorry. If I had known—”

The feminine voice continued, “Despite your fox pass—”

“Faux pas,” corrected the voice of intellect.

“—it is good to meet you, Harris bin Potter,” continued the feminine parcel.

“It is good to meet you too, all of you,” said Harris uncertainly. “But how? How am I speaking to you?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Harris? You’re a parceltongue!”

1 Malay: “It was not delicious! Tasted like ass!” Depending on whom you ask, this might serve as an oxymoron.

2 Misspelling of Bengawan Solo, a pastry franchise and prolific calorie creator. The ondeh-ondeh is to die for, though I must state here for legal reasons that nobody has ever actually died directly due to consumption of any products made

by Bengawan Solo.

3 Five blocks away, to be exact—a walking distance in which one would not break a sweat. But then again, the Palliterations viewed any form of physical activity the way a blind person viewed similes.

[illegible]



Chapter 3: Burung Kakaktua Express

Dawn came. If your name is Dawn, you're welcome.

Dawn came, heralded by the muted scramble of first sunlight across the roads and concrete flats and grassy parks of Tampines. With it came the stirring strains of morning traffic, an undulating symphony of car horns and rumbling engines and the not-quite-French revolution of ever-turning wheels on forever flat tarmac.

Harris bin Potter had been awake for nearly six hours. Sleep eluded him for in the darkness of the kitchen sink cabinet, he felt excluded from the phenomena of night and day. And so all that he knew was what was inside his mind, and all that was inside his mind was an extensive reverie in which he envisioned what his parents might be like; what his life would have been like had they never perished. Maybe they would have taken him to that MatSedap restaurant Dada always raved about. Maybe they would have given him a room of his own, with a nice soft bed. Maybe they'd have allowed music in his room to keep him company when they'd have gone to work, which was something he heard adults go to. His room would have reverberated with songs like "Chan Mali Chan", which Harris had never heard in its folksy yet majestic, original entirety, but had nevertheless been witness to a terrible, terrible rendition by his cousin.

Somehow, however, he knew that "Chan Mali Chan" had a certain magic to it. Even as Dada warbled a lyrically inaccurate version (in preparation for a school performance), Harris could tell that the magic of the song binds the past to the present, and the present to the future. If only he knew what the song meant. He sat up and stretched his legs.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Excuse me?" Harris said.

"Oh, wait, I forgot I'm in Singapore. Ahem. Ten cents for your thoughts?"

Harris knew immediately who, or rather, what he was speaking to. It was a box

—no, a parcel of discarded drill parts that Uncle Pandir had brought home from work the previous night. It smelled of grease and rust, but Harris hardly minded. “You don’t have to give me ten cents just to share my thoughts with you,” he said softly to the only companion he had in the kitchen sink cabinet.

“It’s a figure of spee—you know what, if you don’t want me to, then I shall not.”

“Thanks.”

“You seemed troubled, young man.”

“I’m just thinking about my family.”

“Do you not live with them? The man who manhandled me and filled me with these ghastly metal bits—”

“That’s my uncle. I was referring to my mum and dad.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re dead.”

“What is that, ‘dead’?”

Harris paused. He never considered the life cycles of parcels. “You know, when you cease to be? When you don’t live anymore?”

“We parcels, we just are. After I am a parcel, I may be something else. There is never nothing. And I am very sure that is the case for you humans, too. After death, there is something, but different. There is never nothing.”

Before Harris could reply, the door to the kitchen sink cabinet slid open to reveal Cik Petom’s glowering face. “Who were you talking to?” she asked.

Harris glanced at the box. Just as it was moments ago, the box was sitting motionlessly at the corner of the cabinet. “Myself,” he said.

She looked around for signs of the M word. When she saw none, she barked, “Go wake Dada up and clean all the rooms.”

Dada Palliteration’s room was a work of art, in that some works of art are crap.

Like the haphazard splotches of Jackson Pollack's untitled works, articles of clothing littered Dada's bedroom floor. Looking for any exposed floor was like a Where's Wally? exercise. Harris sighed at the extent of work laid out before him.

But there was also work laid out above him.

Humanity had made strides in art and science, and by a distant extension, room cleaning, by looking up at the stars. And so Harris did the next best thing: he looked up at the ceiling.

There were two pairs of jeans hanging from the ceiling fan. This was a definitive example of the subtle, exquisite overlap of performance and installation art. Two nights ago, lying in bed, Dada had found it too humid to sleep. However, he was too lazy to get up to turn on the fan, so he grabbed his jeans from the floor and flung them, hoping the momentum would cause the fan to spin. At Dada's third attempt, the jeans caught one of the blades, causing the fan to spin a hurricane-like half a rotation. Dada's disappointment was short-lived, as, groping for something else to throw, he found the remote control to his air conditioner. Of course, this led to the realisation of a new problem: there was a pair of jeans hanging from the fan. His solution was simple: throw another pair to dislodge the first. So throw a second pair he did, and the second one, too, got caught in the fan. Too lazy to remove them, Dada left the two pairs of jeans there as he gave in to slumber, under four denim legs.

The chocolate milk splotch on his pearl-white bedsheets was not art, however. Dada had fallen asleep the night before with a glass of chocolate milk in his hands.

Harris sighed. Mentally drained, he closed his eyes and wished all the mess would tidy itself.

And when he opened his eyes, it was so.

Dada's room was clean—spotless. There were no jeans hanging from the ceiling fan. The clothes were gone—they were either in the laundry basket at the corner of the room or folded and stacked neatly in the cupboard. Even the chocolate splotch on his bedsheets was gone. Harris staggered back at what just happened. And indeed, he was asking himself: what just happened?

Harris approached the bed—now pristine save for the rotund, snoring form

hugging a large Merlion plush toy upon it.

“Dada, wake up,” said Harris, shaking his cousin’s sleeping form.

“But I don’t want to, Mummy!” Dada grumbled sleepily. “I want to ride the Merlion to Candyland! I want to eat cookies and muffins and candy canes and bananas dipped in chocolate fondue...”

“Are you dreaming about food? Dada, wake up!”

The obese Palliteration boy bolted up. He wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth, and looked groggily at his cousin.

“Your mum told me to wake you up.”

“Okay! Okay! You’re a damned spoilsport, Harris.” Dada stumbled towards the bathroom and within moments, jets of warm water pattering on Dada and the toilet floor could be heard.

Harris moved to the master bedroom and tried to replicate the “magic”—was that the right term?—of what had happened in Dada’s room. But Uncle Pandir and Cik Petom’s room remained messy. To be fair, it was not as messy as their son’s, but the bed was unmade, and a stack of worn clothes hung unceremoniously from a chair. Harris got to work.

After the master bedroom, he washed and scrubbed the toilets. He was used to this cavalcade of chores—they were part of his daily life at the Palliterations’. He would toil and suffer while the Palliterations would, as they did now, have a sumptuous breakfast (he would take whatever was left over) while watching television.

He had barely finished when his uncle barked from the living room, “Boy, go get the mail.” Uncle Pandir then fished in his pocket for a ring of keys, and threw it in Harris’ general direction. It fell by his feet.

Harris returned with a stack of letters, and handed it to Uncle Pandir. He remained standing in front of his uncle.

Uncle Pandir read the first letter. It was an advertising leaflet from an air conditioner installation firm. “Throw,” he muttered, crumpling it before passing

it to Harris without so much as looking at his nephew.

The second one was a cheque from a client. “Mine,” he said, and handed it sideways to Cik Petom.

The third was a letter from Dada’s teacher, expressing her concern about his bullying the other students in his primary school. Cik Petom looked stricken and held out her hand for it. Uncle Pandir muttered, “Horse crap”—something that Cik Petom, and horses as a species, did not appreciate—and passed the letter to Harris. As he took it, Harris glanced at Dada, whose interest in whatever was on television remained unwavering.

The fourth letter came in a yellowed envelope that had a funny-looking seal on its seal, and a stamp that featured what looked like a parrot. What was strangest about this envelope was the name written in block letters across the front: HARRIS BIN POTTER.

Harris tried to snatch it but Uncle Pandir swiftly raised it out of his reach.

“A letter for Harris?” said Dada disbelievingly, suddenly less interested in television.

“That’s mine!” Harris said, doubling his efforts to seize the letter.

With a groan of frustration, Uncle Pandir shoved Harris aside, and got up to throw the letter into the rubbish chute. “It was a mistake. Nobody writes you letters, Harris bin Potter,” he spat, “because you are nobody!”

The next morning, Harris refused to speak to his relatives, except to grunt an affirmative when told by his aunt to mop the living room floor. On the couch, Uncle Pandir and Dada were deep in conversation.

“He lives in a random corner of the world,” Uncle Pandir was saying to his son as Harris moped and mopped. “He does nothing all year round while his colleagues work. And when he does work, it’s for just one day and to do what? Delivery.

“Santa Claus is Malay.”

“But Papa, so are we,” Dada pointed out. “Doesn’t that make us like Santa?”

“But you forget, Dada, that we are better than that.”

“We’re better than other Malay people? Or Santa Claus?”

“Both, Dada.”

“We’re better than Santa?”

“Oh, much better. Somebody who needs to remove himself from society and live in the North Pole with the Eskimos definitely has something to hide.”

Harris broke his silence. “Don’t call them Eskimos,” he said, dropping his mop. “It’s not nice to call them that. They’re the Inuit people. Would you call black people—”

“Shut up, Harris,” Dada said. “Keep mopping the floor or we’ll do it with your hair.”

And because he was not looking for a fight, Harris did.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Cik Petom was doing the laundry while humming the Malay folk song “Burung Kakaktua”:⁵ “Burung kakaktua hinggap di jendela.”⁶

Then she saw it: an actual parrot perched on the actual window sill. For a mad moment, she thought her singing had summoned it. Then she saw that there was something tied to the parrot’s claw...

“Squawk!” cried a second parrot, announcing its arrival as it joined the first parrot on the sill. Seeing two instances of it, Cik Petom was sure that paper scrolls were tied to these parrots’ claws. She thought she could make out the words “Harris bin Potter” on them. As though it did not expect Cik Petom to be able to read, the parrot cawed, “Letter for Harris bin Potter!”

“Pandir?” she called, tremors in her voice.

“Yes, dear?” he replied from the living room.

“Pandir, can you come in here please?” Her pitch increased with the tremors.

“Yes, dear.” With great effort, he got to his feet.

“Pandir, will you hurry up?”

“I’m coming, dear,” he said as he waddled to the kitchen.

“PANDIR, GODDAMMIT WALK FASTER! THERE ARE BLOODY PARROTS IN THE KITCHEN!”

All three males of the Palliteration household rushed to the kitchen and found that the room could now pass as a parrot-specific aviary. There were more parrots now than when Petom had screamed bloody parrot/murder. A couple of the birds were flying around the kitchen; some had perched on the kitchen sink.

“Holy Polly on crack,” Harris breathed in awe.

“They have letters,” Cik Petom screamed as she swatted and shooed them with her hands. “For THE IDIOT BOY!”

“Mummy!” Dada cried, indignant.

“I was referring to Harris, darling,” Cik Petom said, suddenly sweet even as green-and-yellow-and-red birds flapped around her.

“More letters for Harris?” Dada said incredulously while his mum struggled with what must be a few dozen parrots now. To his cousin, he said, “But—but you’re a nobody!”

And that was what spurred Harris into action. They had always treated him that way, but to hear that now—to be called a nobody when there was a cacophonous pandemonium of parrots for him and only him; to be called a nobody by his cousin, indignant that for once, he, Harris, was the focus of attention—pushed Harris to take matters into his own hands, and quite literally.

With a running jump, Harris caught one of the parrots—with, to his relatives, rather impressive athleticism. The parrot did not struggle and presented a singular leg to its captor. Harris’ relatives could only watch as the boy tugged the letter from the leg.

His heart beating fast, Harris unrolled the yellowing parchment. It was the first time anybody that was not a delivery box had acknowledged his existence. The boy knew he was meant for so much more; there had to be something bigger out

there for him than an endless cycle of house chores, an endless chain of insults from his relatives, and finding different ways to fit into a tiny kitchen sink cabinet. He couldn't be, as Dada said, "a nobody".

Widened, curious, his eyes met the large, bold words at the top of the letter.

"ARE YOU UNHAPPY WITH THE SIZE OF YOUR PENIS? IMPRESS YOUR GIRLFRIEND WITH A LARGER PENIS IN 5 SIMPLE STEPS!"

"Ah, damn it!" Harris cursed. "Spam!"

He looked up at the other birds. They couldn't all be poorly targeted junk mail. Sure enough, one carried a letter that featured a funny-looking crest of what looked like two satay sticks over a shape that looked rather Singapore-like.

But that was the cue for the Palliterations to galvanise into action. "Sit on him!" Pandir ordered his son.

Harris only had time to look helplessly in horror as Dada's humongous derriere descended rapidly upon his chest. Before he knew it, he was pinned down, unable to move, and holding his breath for fear of Dada farting.

While he was rendered immobile, his mind was racing. Someone sent these parrots. Someone who knew him, and deemed him important enough to send an entire aviary to him. He needed to know who. Harris did not have any contact with the outside world, and it would be a nice change to talk to someone who wasn't a box or a Palliteration.

"Call the SPCA! Call the police! Call someone!" Cik Petom shrieked to her husband, as a parrot perched on her shoulder. She flailed about even more wildly, in a manner that was more at home at a rave party.

Uncle Pandir made his call.

In fifteen minutes, with Dada's ample ass still on Harris' chest, a dishevelled Cik Petom making near zero headway in combating a growing number of parrots and Uncle Pandir laughing at silly cat videos on his smartphone outside the kitchen, several men in orange overalls holding dull metallic grey nets rushed into the kitchen.

The Animal Control (Avian Division) officers struggled, but finally caught all the parrots, using a combination of nets and Tasers, and put them into steel cages.

Harris spent the rest of the day clearing brightly coloured feathers and parrot droppings from the kitchen floor.

The next day, perhaps by coincidence, there was a sudden drop in the price of fried parrot rice at the few restaurants in Singapore that have fried parrot rice on their menus.

5 Malay: elder sibling bird, literally. “Kakaktua” is the etymological root for the “cockatoo”, a bird from the cacatuidae family, which includes species of parrots. “Burung kakaktua”, however, refers to parrots in general.

6 The opening lyrics are: “Parrot perching on a window”. Malay song lyrics tend to heavily use imagery and metaphors. This is an exception.



Chapter 4: The Cleaner of Jambans

December—as the momentous closing chapter of the year—collapsed upon Singapore in the form of an unrelenting storm. At Tampines, raindrops pounded and pounded upon grey concrete, as though demanding that it be made privy to the secrets hidden underneath.

It was Sunday. Sunday meant the Palliterations were home for the entire day. This was bad news for the nearest MatSedap restaurant (for the Palliterations were responsible for a bulk of its daily sales); it was also bad news for Harris bin Potter, for it meant he was subject to twenty-four hours of their abuse.

So, more often than not, Harris spent Sundays in his “bedroom”.

Inside the kitchen sink cabinet, he was curled up on his side, speaking to a box—no, not a box, but a parcel—about the fact that it was Boxing Day.

“Why did you humans come up with it?” the parcel asked indignantly, his skin still, unbristling and cardboard-like with incredulity. “The very nerve!”

“We don’t mean it in that sense. It’s not the B-word per se. You see, humans came up with this game, where we sort of punch each other.”

“Why?!” The parcel sounded truly shocked.

“Well, because it was one way of proving that one person is better than the other. We have many of those.”

“Why?!”

“Because—what in the name of Hello Kitty...”

Harris heard a loud, terrible noise like the amplified knocking of a hammer. It jolted him, causing his head to bang painfully against the kitchen sink above him.

“What in the blazing satay—” Pandir started in his armchair. Cik Petom

shrieked.

There was another thunderous sound.

Harris rushed out of the cabinet to find the sturdy front door quaking.

A third knock. This one got Dada to rush out of his room, wearing what appeared to be his mother's lingerie. Before anyone could see him, he bolted back into his room to change. His parents were shocked into immobility, staring stupidly at the door.

Dada came back out in time for the fourth knock, which dislodged the door from its hinges, causing it to fall flat with a loud crash. A monstrous figure stood in the doorway.

"Everythin' is everythin'!" the figure boomed in a rumbling, rather poor Jamaican accent. It then stepped past the threshold, into the residence of the Palliterations.

As the man stepped forward, his face became illuminated. No, scratch that. The more accurate statement would be: his beard became illuminated. His tanned, deep chocolate-coloured face was mostly obscured by facial hair. He was almost two metres tall, bristling with muscle, and had large slabs for hands. He wore a queer bright yellow baju kurung whose seams seemed strained by the various bulges of his body.

"Biggie up, Palliterations!" the huge man said, smiling widely to the relatively small people—and the Palliterations were absolute whales by most people's standards—cowering before him. "Me be Hamid."

Pandir stood up, quaking but defiant. "You...you be paying for the door!"

Behind him, Cik Petom was audibly and visibly sniffing the man, which, Harris knew, was her way of sizing strangers up. This man smelled of motorcycle oil and satay and smoke—the very ingredients of Cik Petom's worst nightmares and wildest fantasies. She leered contemptuously at Hamid.

Hamid smiled at his hosts and scanned the room. His eyes rested on the two boys—first on Harris, then on Dada.

“This is our son Dada,” Pandir said quickly, moving in between Hamid and his son. Uncle Pandir’s apprehensive gaze never left Hamid. He was not used to being the second biggest person in any room.

Hamid addressed Dada directly, and Harris noted with cat-killing curiosity that Hamid’s Jamaican accent was replaced with something out of New Orleans. “Tha’s uh pecuuuliar name. Why yer names’ Dada, little ’un?”

“I was named after my father’s favourite art movement,” Dada said in his best British accent.

“Hah!” Hamid said, looking at Dada’s extremely corpulent disposition. “Movement.”

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?” Petom shrieked.

“Me is here to fetch young ’arris,” Hamid replied as he walked towards Harris, an action that, within the small confines of the HDB apartment, probably registered on the Richter scale. In front of the boy, he knelt such that their eyes met, and he broke out into a disarmingly warm smile. “Is good to see you again, ’arris bin Potter.”

“Hello,” said Harris politely, pretty sure he had never met the large man before—it was impossible to forget a giant like that. But something about Hamid seemed so familiar. “Who are you again?”

“I’m Hamid, of course,” said Hamid, now in a peculiar form of the British accent. When he saw the look of confusion and terror on their faces, he added, “From the letters? I sent yeh a whole bunch—I’m sure the burung kakaktuas (in his accent, he pronounced it as ‘care-cake-too-where’s’) got here. I mean, I tried sending emails and—uh, what do you call those, Wasp-ads?”

“WhatsApps?” Harris offered.

“Ooh, yes that! And I sent uh, texts, but I’ve never been good around kosong technology.”

“You said you were here to fetch me? To take me where?”

“I’m a-taking you to Hog-Tak-Halal-What.”

Harris considered this. “I know it’s tak halal. Hogs, boars, pigs are all tak halal.”

“No, I mean Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

“School of what and WHAT?”

“Witchcraft and Wizardry, mon, like it said in them letters.”

“I never got to read any of them,” Harris said, looking pointedly at his uncle.

“Don’t use that voice on me, boy.”

“Fine,” Harris said. “I never got to read any of them,” he repeated in his best Mickey Mouse impersonation.

“And why da ’ell not?”

“Because he doesn’t need to know what he is!” shrieked Cik Petom. Harris had never heard her like that before.

“He has the potential to be one of the most gifted—”

“FREAK!” Cik Petom screamed to Hamid. “He’s a freak! Just like his parents.”

“EH SIAL LAH YOU DON’T PLAY FATHER MOTHER AR,” Hamid roared. As soon as he did, however, he stopped himself and looked pained. Harris thought he saw the monstrous man—he had no other word for it—de-materialise for a split second. But he was too taken aback and perturbed by this unusually violent expression of contempt by his aunt.

“That’s no way to talk about Jamal and Lalang,” Hamid said, standing up but calmer and vocally more British. His shadow engulfed Cik Petom.

“My wife,” Pandir said, squaring up to the much larger Hamid, “can say what she wants about whomever she wants in our house.”

“Fine, but Harris learns about where ’e comes fruhm,” said Hamid. “Is why me heres, anyways.”

“Sure he can, when they stop making Ramly burgers,” Pandir was saying, but Hamid ignored the smaller man.

“You’ll understand everythin’ after you’ve read the letter,” said the big man, extracting a letter from his shirt pocket. He passed it to Harris, a gentle look in his eyes.

Harris read the letter, taking in every word hungrily. “But Hamid, I don’t have any money to send to the Nigerian prince—”

Hamid snatched the letter from Harris. “Sorry, we’re having a spam problem with parrots.” He extracted a second letter, and gave it to Harris, who unfolded it and read aloud:

HOG-TAK-HALAL-WHAT
SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY
(ISO 80085:420 certified)

Headmaster: Professor Airbus Dinosaur,
also known as Pakcik Dollah, Ph.D
(Current Head of SEMEN)

Harris stopped reading. “SEMEN?”

Hamid stuttered. Then he said, “You see, Harris, when a man and a woman love one another—”

“I meant in the letter.”

“Ah! Well, that was almost an MRT breakdown, eh? SEMEN, ma bruvver, is the

Society of Elite Magical Educators and Nurturers. Very smart, although some o' the things they say are hard to swallow. Read on, little 'un."

The little 'un read on:



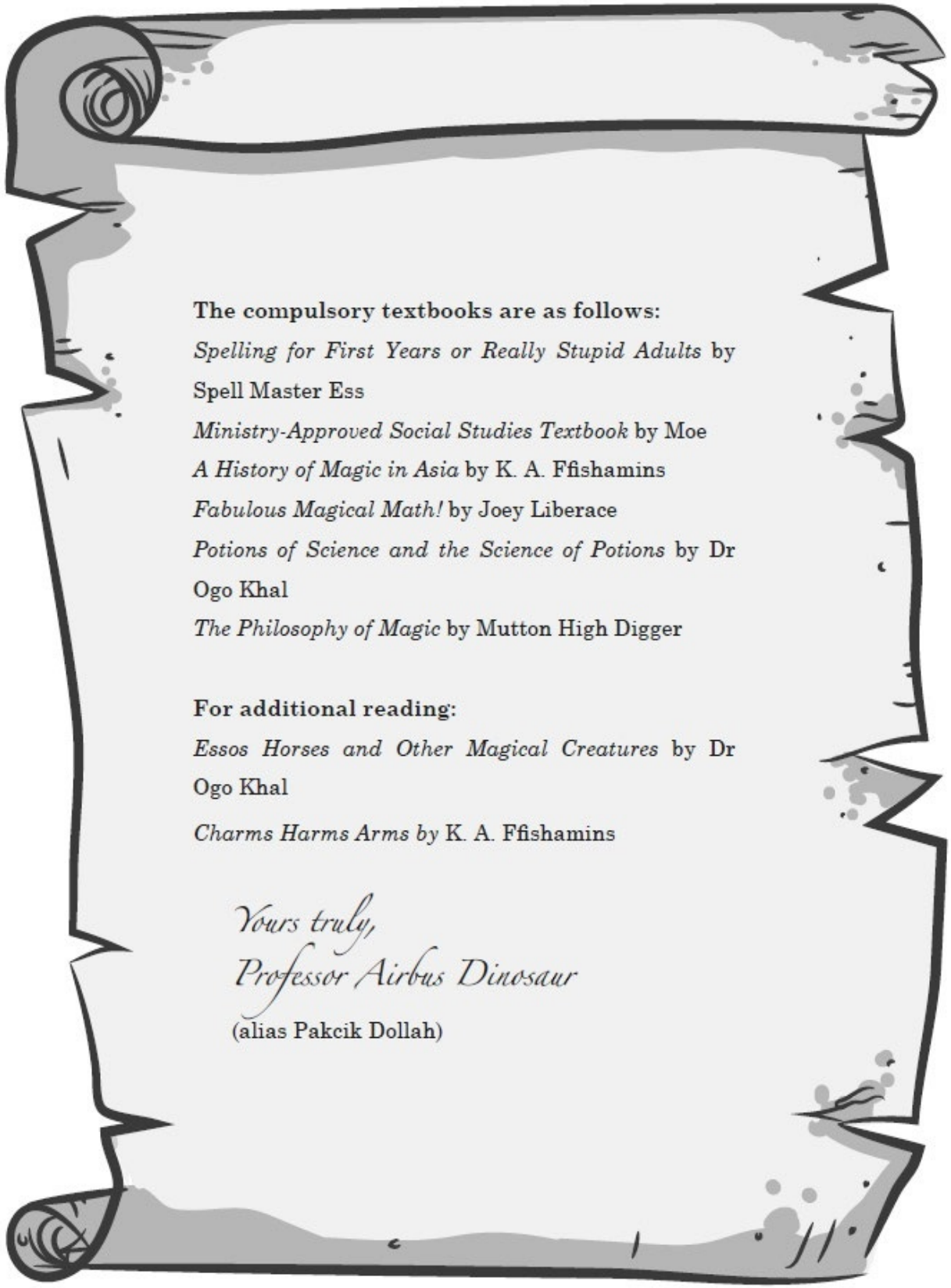
Dear Mr Harris bin Potter,

It is my distinct honour to welcome you to a wondrous education here at Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

As a first-year student, you will learn the fundamentals of magic in a safe, conducive environment, taught by SEMEN-certified educators, within facilities considered to be one of the best among Asia's top magical academies.

We understand that, as a member of the non-magical community, you might take some time getting used to the ways and customs of Singapore's magical community. We assure you that Hog-Tak-Halal-What offers first-class integration solutions for students from non-magical backgrounds.

Your school uniform and physical education gear will be made available to you in school. All students of Hog-Tak-Halal-What must stay in the school hostels due to the sensitive nature of a magical education. You will be allowed to return to your relatives on public holidays and during semester breaks.



The compulsory textbooks are as follows:

Spelling for First Years or Really Stupid Adults by
Spell Master Ess

Ministry-Approved Social Studies Textbook by Moe

A History of Magic in Asia by K. A. Ffishamins

Fabulous Magical Math! by Joey Liberace

Potions of Science and the Science of Potions by Dr
Ogo Khal

The Philosophy of Magic by Mutton High Digger

For additional reading:

Essos Horses and Other Magical Creatures by Dr
Ogo Khal

Charms Harms Arms by K. A. Ffishamins

Yours truly,
Professor Airbus Dinosaur
(alias Pakcik Dollah)

After reading the attached form, Harris looked up and around, not knowing what to say. Finally, he said, “So let me get this straight. I’m a wizard?”

“Even if you got it as a gay person, you still are, Harris,” Hamid said.

“A wizard?”

“Yes!” shrieked Cik Petom. “Yes, you are! Do you know how stressful it is to always look out for signs of magic every time I’m around you? It was the same with my sister. And my parents thought she was special—and not the Institute of Mental Health kind of special, but special like she was a precious thing.” Her words were drenched in spite as she spat vitriol and disdain for her deceased sister.

Hamid was looking at Cik Petom with an awful realisation. Then, to Harris, he said, “Yes, you’s a wizard, just like you’s momma, who was the kindest, most beautiful soul me’s met. Just like you’s dad.”

Harris processed that part quickly. It all seemed to make sense—his aunt and uncle’s unexplained disdain for his parents, the strange happenings, his ability to talk to parcels. Perhaps there was a world out there where he wasn’t alone, where being Harris bin Potter wasn’t such a bad thing. “Well, then I want to go to Hog-Tak-Halal-What,” Harris said, making for the door...

“Dada!” Uncle Pandir commanded. “Sit on him!”

But Hamid reacted first. He withdrew what appeared to be a satay stick from his pocket, pointed it at Dada, waved it and exclaimed, “Mangkuk Siol!” Harris could only watch, half in awe and half in delighted amusement, as Dada shrunk and transformed into a brown porcelain bowl.

With that, Hamid grabbed Harris and fled.

Harris was still laughing when they reached the void deck.

“Don’t worry, mon,” Hamid said. “Yo’ cuz be back to normal in...” Hamid

paused, and was obviously counting in his head. The half-giant finally held up two fingers. "...in three minutes."

"I'm not worried about that lah," Harris said, smiling. He was exhilarated at finally being away from his Uncle Pandir, his Cik Petom and his cousin Dada. "I'm just happy to be rid of them."

"Oh, they're just ruddy kosongs," said Hamid.

"Kosongs?"

"You know, like roti prata?"

Harris thought of Uncle Pandir, the very antithesis of the Ministry of Health's anti-obesity movement, and Dada, who had singlehandedly kept several candy stores in business. He then thought about how roti prata kosongs were flat, thin, low-calorie bread. "How are my relatives like roti prata?"

"They're kosong. Empty. Devoid of magic."

"But I'm...not a kosong?"

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no."

"That was six no's," Harris pointed out.

"No," Hamid said one more time. "Far from it. You come from a line of powerful wizards. Your great-grandfather was Jamal bin Potter, a famous spellmaker. He created the Kitorang⁷ spell."

"Kitorang?" Harris said it uncertainly, for Hamid appeared opaque for a fraction of a moment.

"A very useful spell that allows the subject of the spell to empathise with the spellcaster. Not the grandest of magic—there aren't any superfluous flourishes, no residuary sparks or sizzles—but its enchantment lies in the friendships it creates, and the conflicts it dispels."

"What about—" and Harris felt childish for the end of that thought.

“Your parents?” Hamid puffed his chest. “Jamal and Lalang were da best of us, they is. They were two of the most talented mata-magics I’ve ever seen with my...mata.”⁸ Hamid seemed to quite literally fade again.

“Mata-magics?”

“They’re the police of the magical world. There’s so much ye don’t know! What have those kosongs been teaching you?”

“How to clean rooms, wash plates, fit into small places,” Harris replied, realising that he would not miss his old “bedroom” if he were to never see it again. By now, they were stepping past the cluster of apartment buildings, into a large, open grassy field. “So how are we getting to Hog—to the school?”

Hamid stopped Harris barely ten steps into the field. “Three words, ma friend: Magic MRT.”

Hamid waved his satay stick, and the ground around them parted. Slabs of concrete groaned forth from underground, and twisted in an almost desultory fashion into pillars and ceilings and what resembled rigid architecture.

A huge blue-grey MRT station arose from under them, materialising around and above and under them to the sound of churning concrete and what seemed to be human whispers growing steadily louder. Within moments, there was an entire station before him, packed with people going about their day. Most of them wore robes or baju kurung. In his T-shirt and track pants, Harris felt out of place.

“Down-bound train arriving. Please stand clear,” a female voice announced.

Harris looked up instinctively, fearing an entire train descending on him. “Down-bound?”

“The Magic MRT works in six dimensions,” said Hamid, as though explaining why the sky is blue.

“How is it that nobody sees this?”

“We magical people, we see dem. We see dem good. It’s non-magic folk who don’t see. There’s a spell we use, we’s calls it Uwe Boll Movie. Renders dem non-magical folk incapable of seeing it.”

“And absolutely nobody outside of the magical world will see it?”

“None.”

“None at all?”

“At the opposite end of the scale from a free textbooks giveaway.”

“Even if they’re physically where the place is?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

Hamid went to a ticket-dispensing machine, only it did not look like one. It was essentially a floating rectangle of glowing magical energy, whose mana-fuelled whooshes faded and materialised into instructions on how they could procure tickets. Hamid jabbed his satay stick towards the “machine”, and a pair of tickets instantly appeared in his non-satay-stick hand.

They proceeded to insert their tickets into the receptacle at the train gantry and stepped onto the magic carpet⁹ that whisked them to the train platforms. There were two full platforms. Due to a reverence to common sense, the station numbered the platforms with whole numbers. No fractions were used. Platforms one and two. Not platform one and three-fifths, or platform nine and three-quarters.

“We’s goin’ to Lorong Diagon Station.”

Harris looked at the holographic map in the middle of the boarding platform. To get to Lorong Diagon Station from Tampines, they had to go one station up—yes, up—before heading three stations westwards in the direction of central Singapore. The map indicated that the next train was three minutes away.

“Hamid, can I ask you something?”

“Anythin’, bruvver.”

“What is wrong with your accent?”

“What accen’ you on aboot, ’arris?”

“That accent.”

“I don’t speak wit no accent,” Hamid said in a thick accent.

“Actually, you speak in multiple accents.”

Hamid sighed. “No use hidin’ it from yeh, I guess.”

“No use hiding it from anyone, if you ask me.”

“I tried to speak the way I used to, I sure did,” Hamid said.

“What happened when you did? When you spoke with your old accent?”

“I disappeared, I became invisible.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, let me show you.”

“Wait! Will it be permanent?” Looking at Hamid’s not-quite invisible face, Harris saw how stupid his question was.

“No, depends on how long it is. The more me speaks, the longer me is transparent.”

“Will it hurt?”

“A bit. Nuttin’ me can’t ’andle.” Hamid took a deep breath. And then he recited in perfect Malay: “Marilah kita berseru dengan semangat yang baru!”

With an onomatopoeically unfortunate “Poop!” the large, muscular man vanished into thin air. In just under ten seconds, he reappeared, kneeling on the floor, grabbing at his throbbing left chest in pain. Harris, who was an expert in head throbs but not heart-throbs, did not know what to do.

Quickly getting on his feet, Hamid said, “I’m fine, ’arris, no worries.” The giant straightened dramatically and smiled reassuringly at the boy. “Really, I’m fine.”

Harris smiled back uncertainly.

Then Hamid, probably trying to change the subject to a less gloomy one, said, “I’m guessing your aunt and uncle didn’t tell you the truth about how your parents died?”

“They told me that my parents died from food poisoning.”

Hamid looked incredulously at Harris, and this confirmed Harris’ suspicions that the Palliterations created that story so he would not have developed the kind of appetite that would affect the food distribution.

“They were murdered, Harris,” Hamid said softly, “by a dark and powerful wizard.”

“So, this wizard was the one who made the satay? Damn that bastard from Johor!”

“No! No! There was no satay from Johor involved. This wizard personally killed your parents,” Hamid said solemnly.

“What was his name?” The words came out slowly from Harris, through a veil of controlled rage.

“Oldermat,” Hamid replied, with all the enthusiasm of a terrified child being forced to say “Bloody Mary” into a mirror for a third time.

“Which mat? Who’s he older than?”

“No, that’s his name. Oldermat. Thing is, on the night he killed your parents, he also tried to kill you. But he failed. He failed, Harris! Like a Mat trying to do advanced Mathematics, he failed. And people say he’s now dead, thanks to you.”

Harris only stared wordlessly as he tried to digest all of this.

“You’re the boy who tak mati, siol!”

There was no other way to describe what happened next other than this: Hamid flickered. One moment he was a corporeal, and then for the next three seconds, he was not.

7 A portmanteau of the Malay phrase “kita orang”: we people, bringing with it insinuations of unity, togetherness and harmony.

8 Malay: “eye”, but “mata” was also used colloquially in newly-independent Singapore to mean policemen, the “watchers”, if you will.

9 Many magical visitors to Singapore question why the magical authorities here do not use magic carpets as the primary mode of transportation, as is used by the magical communities of the Middle East and certain provinces of China. This is due to the Chewing Gum Incident of 1991, when stray blobs of chewing gum were disposed upon a magic carpet. The magic carpet got tangled and twisted, and crashed. Magic carpet use has since been severely regulated, and chewing gum was banned the year after.



Chapter 5: ‘Di Mana Dia, Anak Kambing Saya?’

It is worth noting at this juncture the true nature of the Chan Mali Chan spell. Lord Oldermat created it late one night, after binge-reading Ayn Rand while high on a potent cocktail of bubble tea and tongkat ali. He wanted to create a spell that encapsulated all of his anger towards Malay language and culture. And he felt that the one element of the culture that summed up its grotesque backwardness was the Malay folk song “Chan Mali Chan”.

The first two lines of the song go:

Di mana dia,

Anak kambing saya?

Or, in the much-preferred Queen’s English, the first two lines could be condensed into, “Where is my baby goat?” To Lord Oldermat, that highlighted everything wrong with the Malay people. They were an irresponsible group, prone to laziness and therefore misplacing the baby goat that, for no reason he could think of would be celebrated in song. They were a truly despicable people, if they could even be classified as people.

And the song—oh, the horrid, horrid song. It came on the radio unexpectedly and it burnt his ears, and seared his brain. Then the idea came to him—the perfect means of forbidding the song, as well as putting the Malay people in their place.

And so a perpetually pissed-off and evil Lord Oldermat went about creating the spell, waving his wand (for he abhorred the use of satay sticks) this way and that, channelling his anger and hatred and magical energies into a beam of concentrated, racist evil—a beam that would magically scan its target’s brain for knowledge of the full lyrics to “Chan Mali Chan”. If the target knew the words to the song, the spell would cause said brain to explode into bloody, grisly chunks of unthinking flesh.

He practised the spell on his first victim the following week: a passing cat who

annoyed him by meowing pathetically. It did not work, and he resorted to kicking the cat while growling incoherently.

His first successful cast was on a homeless Malay boy who had crossed his path. The boy had the nerve to beg him for money. “To buy food for me and my sister,” said the boy.

Lord Oldermat smiled at the opportunity that had presented itself, though he wished it were on a silver platter that was less homeless-grimy. “It’s ‘To buy food for my sister and me’, ungrammatical fool!” The dark wizard brandished his wand and, with a jabbing motion, shouted, “Chan Mali Chan!”

The golden beam hit the boy in his chest. He fell to his knees, his body wracked in quivers of agony. Lord Oldermat grinned, realising that the boy appeared to be six or seven—old enough to process his mortality through his pain, and more important, old enough to possibly know the lyrics to “Chan Mali Chan”.

“Di mana dia, anak kambing saya?” the boy groaned through his agony.

And then, it happened. A small rumbling came from somewhere behind the boy’s throat. It grew, along with an uncontrollable, terrible trembling that coursed through the boy’s small frame. It heightened to a crescendo. And then the boy’s head exploded, a flourish of blood and bone and gristle. Lord Oldermat whooped in joy and fled the scene, dancing and singing as though he were in Bizzaro Mary Poppins.

The first person at the scene of the murder—the one who called in the crime—was an elderly Malay man who chanced upon the corpse nearly an hour after Lord Oldermat had cast that spell.

Possibly the most woefully disregarded aspect of Chan Mali Chan is the miasma it leaves behind. Depending on how powerful the spellcaster, the miasma can linger for a few seconds to, in the case of Lord Oldermat and the murder of the bin Potters, a couple of days. This miasma would latch on to any woebegone soul who steps into it, and would fester inside his or her being, a dark magic parasite that, while bereft of the hateful energy and fatal capabilities, retained the original spell’s discrimination against the culture, language and people that created the awful song. Those exposed to the miasma would be cursed for the rest of their lives, for if they spoke in Malay or anything resembling a Malay accent, they would become invisible, unseen, unheard, nonexistent. Initially, they

would merely phase into invisibility for mere seconds or minutes, but as the parasite took hold of more and more of their being, even the slightest word in Malay would wipe them permanently out of existence. This process would take months, which Lord Oldermat saw as mercy: he was giving his bystander victims time to rehabilitate, to make themselves less “Malay”, as it were.

It was powerful, dark magic, and it heralded a truly dystopian era in Singapore’s wizarding community. As its kosongs enjoyed economic prosperity, social and cultural development and whatever a Youth Olympics was, the clandestine society alongside them suffered.

Lord Oldermat rapidly recruited a legion of followers who shared his belief: that English spoken with a Malay accent is a sign of backwardness; that the new world order did not have space for a people who seemed to struggle with the progressive ideals of the 21st century; that the Malay people were lazy liabilities in modern society; and that they, Lord Oldermat and his followers, would be the ideal shot in the arm the Malay people needed to get off their nasi lemak-laden behinds.

This thinking evolved with the thirteenth victim of Chan Mali Chan, a Chinese teenager who was trying to protect his Malay friend. The Chinese boy took the golden beam in his chest as he flung his body between Lord Oldermat and his friend. The dark wizard and his followers were surprised when the Chinese boy’s head exploded. “Race does not determine your culture,” said the intended target defiantly, before receiving a blast of the spell himself. He died shortly after.

It was at about this time when a strike force of mata-magics, led by Jamal and Lalang bin Potter, succeeded in apprehending a large bulk of Lord Oldermat’s followers. In retaliation, Lord Oldermat murdered Jamal and Lalang in their home, before receiving his untimely defeat at the hands of an infant Harris bin Potter.

Perhaps we should back up a bit and explore the origin of Lord Oldermat’s anger and hatred towards Malay culture and language. But that, dear reader, is for another book and another time.¹⁰

¹⁰ Author: “Attention, we have a broken fourth wall on this page. I repeat, fourth wall broken! Can we have a clean-up crew on this page pronto?”

Book Universe Chief Engineer: “Hey author, noted on the request. I’ll dispatch a team of engineers to rebuild the fourth wall and restore suspension of disbelief.”

Author: “Okay, do it quickly. I’m taking up footnote space here.”

Book Universe Chief Engineer: “Engineering team on the way. Please buy us some time.”

Author: “Oh, hey reader! I did not see you there! How are you?”

You: “(your response here)”

Author: “Oh, (your response here)! What a fascinating response! I really must apologise for the broken fourth wall. It happens every now and then, nothing to panic about. The process of writing is sometimes akin to swinging a hammer around. Sometimes you hit a nail right on its head, sometimes you accidentally break a—”

Engineer: “Fourth wall restoration in three—two—”

Author: “Okay—”



Chapter 6: Sial Lah, Lorong Diagone!

“U p-bound train to Lorong Diagone has arrived,” came a soothing female voice that filled the entire station, which Harris noted was devoid of speakers. The train did not so much arrive as it materialised.

The train itself was as magical as anything Harris had seen since fleeing Block 222. Its walls were iridescent. They seemed to be made of one smooth sheet of mother-of-pearl. There were no windows in the traditional sense—the Magic MRT train merely had window-sized holes in the walls, as though carved out by laser or indeed, magic. As the carriage whooshed upwards, Harris could feel the air surge with it. However, all the passengers—Harris included—stood in their places, stable, as though the laws of Physics did not matter inside the train.

“You sure you’re alright?” Harris asked his new friend.

Hamid cleared his throat, and touched his body, as if to ensure it was there.
“Yeah, I am.”

“Are you sure it didn’t hurt? It looked painful.”

“Don’t you worry about me, Harris bin Potter.”

“How did this happen?”

“Chan Mali Chan, my bruvver.”

“The folk song?”

“The spell. On the night yo’ parents...yeh know, on the night me came to get you as a baby, methinks me was exposed to the residential effects of That-Evil-Bastard-Lah-You-Should-Know-Who-I’m-Talking-About’s spell.”

“Residual.”

“What?”

“Residual effects. Never mind, go on.”

“As you saw earlier, I straight-up vanish everytime I speak in Malay, or in a Malay accent.” Hamid looked positively forlorn, and Harris felt the urge to pat the man on his enormous shoulders. “That’s why me speak with accents. To throw me speech as far away from the Malay language as possible.”

“Can we fix it?” Harris asked.

“Pakcik Dollah has tried for years and years.”

“We’ll think of something,” the boy said encouragingly, despite not knowing where to even begin reversing any spell, let alone whatever this Chan Mali Chan was.

“What’s at Lorong Diagone?” Harris asked after a few moments’ silence.

“Oh, everything. Everything.”

The train began screeching to a halt. The same soothing voice from the Tampines Magic MRT station rang loud and clear, “Lorong Diagone.”

Lorong Diagone was unlike anything Harris had ever seen. The buildings seemed independent of an urban development committee, despite the truth of the contrary. There were residences, retail outlets, training centres, the occasional pasar malam-style roadside stall and other real estate that served the various needs of Singapore’s magical community. Due to this multitude of non-uniform buildings, the brick path that connected them snaked in some lanes and was ramrod straight in others. Sometimes, the path widened into a plaza; sometimes it bottlenecked, with adjacent buildings so close that they were almost touching.

The first thing that greeted Harris and Hamid was a grand MatSedap outlet. It occupied half a block and was ablaze with neon and fluorescent lights—if you had seen it from afar, it might twinkle. Inside, the restaurant was crowded with magical folk, wearing colourful baju kurung, conjuring sauces and gravy with their satay sticks. The only thing Harris found similar to the MatSedap outlets in the world of the kosongs was the menu.

They each ordered an ayam penyet. Harris had his with a Milo Dinosaur and a serving of vadai, while Hamid had his with coffee, as he liked it, dark and sweet

like a John Legend song, or, come to think of it, John Legend himself. After a lifetime of eating whatever Dada didn't want, Harris had his best meal ever in MatSedap, with a strange man that he had met only hours before.

"That's our first stop," said Hamid, pointing to a tall building, whose sides curved slightly, giving it the overall appearance of a book spine. "It's Singapore's most freakin' famous bookstore," he added matter-of-factly.

"What's it called?"

"Freakin' Famous Bookstore."

"So like Popul—"

"No, Harris! No! Not like that one. This one is a magical bookstore."

They headed to Freakin' Famous Bookstore immediately after their meal. Harris had been inside a bookstore before, when purchasing Dada's school textbooks, but they were placid affairs (if you discount Dada's grumbling at wanting to be in an arcade rather than a bookstore).

This one was different.

Some of the books were alive, moving and growling or meowing or barking. Some jumped in their shelves. Some—these tended to be duelling books—were fighting other books. An unmoving one caught the boy's eyes.

"This book has my name on it," Harris said, picking up a leather-bound copy. The title read: Harris bin Potter and the Meta Reference.

"There are many books written about yeh, Harris," said Hamid. "You's famous."

Harris did not take this with pride. "At the expense of my parents," he said under his breath bitterly. Hamid did not hear him.

They reached a section for textbooks and purchased all the titles on the list from Hog-Tak-Halal-What, including the two for extra reading.

"Now we have to buy you a pet," Hamid said outside the shop.

A memory stirred in Harris' mind: that of a large flock of parrots. "Why?"

"It is a magical tradition, mon," said Hamid. "When a young wizard enrolls into magical school, he gets a pet."

The pet store was a mess of coloured feathers and skins, with a backing soundtrack of hoots and growls and song. Some were standard pets—Harris saw cat and dog enclosures, bird cages for parrots and the like. But there were also fantastic beasts.

But only one bird caught Harris' eye. It was a majestic parrot, with neat, pristine red and black and green feathers.

Harris thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Hello thereee," Harris cooeed in a manner that demanded more Es.

The bird stared at the boy, and did not show if it could say hello. In fact, it said nothing.

"I'm Harris," the boy said, pressing on.

The bird remained silent.

"Can you say 'Harris'? Say 'Harris', little birdie! Come on, say 'Harris'!" Harris continued cooing. "Come on, little birdie, say my name!"

The bird blinked and said nothing.

"Can you say 'Harris'?" Harris cooed. "Say 'Harris', little birdie."

The parrot parted its beak. "Fuck you, jackass."

Beaming broadly, Harris declared, "I'm getting this one!"

"You sure, m'boy?" asked Hamid.

"Surer than Ash when he chose Pikachu!"

"You bet your fucking beard, twatnose!" squawked the parrot.

“Awright, what are yeh gonna name it?”

“Let’s give it a name starting with H, like me and you!”

Both fell silent, giving this due consideration.

“How about,” Hamid suggested, “John Jacob Jingleheimer—”

“Starting with H, Hamid!”

“Okay. Hohn Hacob Hingle—”

“No!”

Both fell silent again.

Hamid suggested, “What about Hedwig? I’ve ’eard of owls with ze name.”

“No, no. Hedwig is a stupid name. Where else is a wig supposed to be, other than the hed? Might as well call it Buttstool.”

Once again, they fell silent. Hamid studied the bird. “Well, we want a name that’s edgy and fun, like the bird itself.”

Harris’ eyes widened. “It’s obvious what I have to name him then! I shall name him...”

Harris declared with conviction, “Hedgefund!” at the same time that Hamid declared with similar conviction, “Shaniqua!”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Hamid said quickly. “Hedgefund...Hedgefund is, uh, a good name.”

From the pet store, they moved on to The Stationary Stationery Store, named for the fact that it was, as most concrete buildings tended to be, unmoving.

After that, it was on to Pak Ahmad’s Baju Kurung Emporium, where Harris purchased a set of school uniforms¹¹ and school sportswear for himself.

Outside Pak Ahmad’s, Hamid was ticking off a shopping list for Harris when he

looked up at the boy and gave a wide smile. “Just one more thing, ’arris—your satay stick.”

The giant man led Harris further down Lorong Diagone, past a myriad of strange and wacky shops—including one that catered specifically to centaurs called Topman Bottomhorse—to a shophouse with a peeling façade and a fading sign that read: Ollivadai’s Satay Sticks.

Harris held the door open for Hamid, before stepping into Ollivadai’s Satay Sticks. The store was messy. Hundreds of boxes containing satay sticks cluttered the floor and dusty display tables. Stacks of them blocked the windows, adding to the gloom.

There were a few people walking about in shadowy aisles, occasionally picking up a satay stick. Some sniffed the sticks. Some made sparks shoot out of them.

Hamid walked through the dark place cheerfully, while Harris trailed behind apprehensively. He could feel the magic present in the sloppy shop, and he was uncertain of what to expect here.

At the far end was a counter where a grimy, grey cash register sat in shadow and silence.

A sign above the counter read:

PROMOTION:

FOR EVERY FIVE DOLLARS YOU PAY,

WE WILL GIVE YOU FIVE DOLLARS WORTH OF OUR PRODUCTS.

Another sign at the end of the room read:

ALL SATAY STICK LENGTHS ARE

MEASURED IN CENTIMETRES.

“Most big wand shops like Topwand from the UK measure their wands in inches,” explained Hamid, noticing Harris’ glances.

“Indeed,” said a wheezing, almost ancient voice from behind the counter. An old man stepped out from the shadows. Skin and bones, he made his way around the counter carefully, and Harris was sure he could hear the old man’s bones creak. This man must be Ollivadai.

“Here, we use the metric sytem,” Ollivadai finished in an Indian accent as he finally reached them. “Welcome, Hamid!” He beamed at Hamid, but ceased when he caught sight of Harris and the scar on his forehead.

“Ah, Harris bin Potter! I knew this day would come!” The old man whooped and placed a claw-like hand on Harris’ shoulder.

“How did you know it was me, sir?”

“It’s that strange lightning-shaped—”

“S-shaped,” said Harris flatly.

“It’s that scar of yours, boy.”

“This S-shaped scar on my forehead here?”

Ollivadai paused. “Yes.” Then he continued, “You’ve done great things, boy. You stopped the greatest evil this land has ever known, before you even learned how to walk!”

Harris’ face warmed as he blushed at Ollivadai’s proud smile.

“Now, I assume you’re here to pick your first satay stick?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m glad you chose me and not Topwand.”

“Why would a British wand shop measure in inches and not use the metric system? It’s so confusing,” said Harris.

“They’re pandis—I mean, they’re pandering to an American audience, that’s why. And not just that—those idiots also anyhow put animal parts in their wands. Dragon heartstring lah. Unicorn hair lah. Why someone would pull out a string from the heart of a dragon—a bloody godforsaken fire-breathing, roast-you-into-tandoori-chicken dragon, mind you—and think, ‘Why don’t I put this thing in a piece of wood’ is beyond me! Here in Singapore, if I anyhow put animal parts in my satay sticks, SPCA will come after me!”

They followed Ollivadai as he roamed the shop.

Having finished his rant, the old man said in a more composed voice, “Most of the modern wand shops would disagree with me, but I believe that a satay stick is for life. They say, ‘How can we make business if each person buys only one wand and sticks to it for the rest of their life?’ To them I say, ‘Shut up, money-minded fool!’ A wand is for life because you need to be familiar with how it channels your magical energies. The effectiveness of your spells is dependent on your satay stick.”

He reached a table of satay sticks near the entrance. He held one up for Harris, but quickly put it back, muttering, “No, no, no, you are no mere pull-a-rabbit-out-of-a-hat kind of wizard.”

They moved on.

Ollivadai eventually picked out a satay stick from a shelf at the side of the shop, and passed it to Harris. “Twenty-one centimetres, was used for chicken satay. Hmm. Give it a wave.”

Holding the satay stick with his right hand, Harris waved at it with his left.

Hamid facepalmed.

“Dei, idiot!” cried Ollivadai. “I meant wave the satay stick! Not at it.”

“Oh,” Harris said. “I knew that.” He flicked the satay stick in a downward motion, creating a fiery vertical line that lingered, suspended in the air, before fading.

“Hmm, underwhelming,” said Ollivadai, taking the stick from Harris’ hands. The wandsmith turned towards his satay stick cases, and reached for one on an upper rickety shelf. “Try this one,” he said. “Sixteen centimetres, was used for pork—”

“WHOA, HEY, BRO! BRO!” cried Harris, backing away from the satay stick.

“MON! MON, MON!” exclaimed Hamid, this time in a Jamaican accent.

“But the pork is no longer there!”

“It don’t matter, mon!” Hamid said.

“Fine! Fine! Let’s try a different one.” Ollivadai picked out a different wand from the rickety shelf. “Seventeen centimetres, grass-fed wagyu beef chateaubriand.”

“Ah, a satay steak stick,” Hamid said.

“These little details are important, young Harris. There are higher stakes if you stick to a satay steak stick,” Ollivadai pointed out. “Whether you choose a steak stick or a sautéed satay stick—whether you choose a teak stick or a thick stick—it all makes a difference.”

Harris took the length of pliable wood, and flicked it. Initially, there was nothing. Then there was a great light and gasps from the other two men. One was a Jamaican-accented gasp, the other was Ollivadai’s.

A great pillar of fire had appeared, brilliant and unburning and smokeless.

The pillar dissipated with a whiz-pop when Harris lowered his hand.

Ollivadai was almost breathless. “In all my years of selling wands,” he said, “I have never seen that happen. It is as well as all expected: you have tremendous magical potential. That’s why you survived the night That-Evil-Bastard-Lah-You-Should-Know-Who-I’m-Talking-About killed your parents. I think you’ve found the perfect satay stick for yourself.”

Harris could feel it: a current coursing through his body, tingling with magical energy, beginning from the deepest recesses of his brain and ending at the tip of the satay stick. “It’s perfect,” he told the adults.

11 The uniform of choice at Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where students can choose to wear brown or their house colours. Many have complained about the ethnic specificity of the school uniform. Some quarters argue for the inclusion of cheongsams, tangzhuang jackets and sarees, while others defend the centuries-old tradition of the baju kurung. Uniforms, they add, should be uniform after all.



Chapter 7: Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harris bin Potter spent New Year's Eve in Lorong Diagone, most of it in the flat that Hamid had rented for them. Harris had a million questions about his parents and this magical world they had come from. Hamid obliged where he could. "They were the kindest people I've ever known," he said. "Your mum never had an unkind word to say about anyone, even her sister."

Harris wondered what the Palliterations were up to. He wondered what it was like for his mother to grow up with Cik Petom's grating voice. He wondered what Uncle Pandir was like as a child—if he was born rotund, or if he had rotundness thrust upon him. He wondered if Dada was still a brown porcelain bowl.

Hamid even taught Harris a few simple spells. There was Mak Kau!, which was a generic spell to remove low-level unpleasantnesses such as terrible smells, spilt milk and stains. Harris found he used it often, especially after Hamid had used the bathroom. Hamid also taught him the Bacon spell. If he pointed his satay stick towards the sky, the spell would shoot a red beam of light that would be visible from a hundred kilometres away, and only to friends and family of the spellcaster. Hamid explained later that the Malay wizard who had created the spell in 1952 did not have autocorrect or spell check back then, and had omitted an "e" when naming the spell. Although it was a useful spell, many Muslim and Jewish members of the magical community were thoroughly offended by the unfortunate typo and, for once, were united in a single goal. Because the spell had been created, registered and Merlinlocked (the magical community equivalent of "patented"), it had stayed exactly as it was. There are those who still refuse to use the spell (even though no actual bacon was involved), and would rather remain lost than let their loved ones find them. Some among the magical community have even resorted to using kosong technology such as smartphones to detect their loved ones.

Near midnight, on the final day of the year, Hamid knocked on Harris' bedroom door.

“I have a new year’s present for yeh,” the giant of a man said as he stepped in. A photograph was thrust at the boy. Harris took it and gazed upon the image of a woman with the kindest eyes he had ever seen, and of a man with a shock of dark, curly hair. The couple were moving in the photo: the man held the woman close, before kissing her and then waving towards the camera. There was undeniable love between them. A large three-storey house could be seen in the background. A sign indicated that this was Yishun Ring Road (Magical).

“Are these...my parents?”

“No, it’s Spongebob Square Pants and the love of his life, Cthulu. Of course it’s your parents! Why would I be giving you a photograph of completely random people?”

“Oh. Right.” Harris studied the photo hungrily. His mother had a slight baby bump.

“I took this photo. We were on our way to have dinner with your father’s best friends, Rhoomba Lapis and Seriously Black.” Hamid sighed, and his breath bore with it more than a decade of regret.

Outside, Singapore declared that it was a new year by way of fireworks.

“Anyway, happy new year, Harris,” said Hamid, making his way back out the door.

“Happy new year, Hamid,” Harris returned, more to the photograph than to Hamid. The boy fell asleep nearly an hour later, unable to tear his eyes away from the image of his parents, thinking of the love they shared with each other—a love that could have warmed the past eleven years of his life.

It was early the following Monday when the two left the flat. They headed to the Magic MRT station and looked out for the train bound for—

“The PIE. That’s where we’s stoppin’,” said Hamid as they took the magic carpet up to the platform.

“The Pan-Island Expressway has a Magic MRT station?”

“The wot?”

“The PIE. The Pan-Island Expressway.”

“Wot in bloomin’ dales is a Pan-Island Expressway?”

“It’s a long stretch of road,” Harris said. “Connects most of Singapore.”

“Oh, we have no need for those in the magical community, Harris.”

The train soon materialised before them, and boy and giant boarded it. Harris was wearing his brown baju kurung, and he realised that several other children about his age were wearing them too. They all looked nervous. Some were clinging to their parents, apprehensive about their first day of magic school.

Four stops later,¹² they arrived at the spectacular scarlet PIE Magic MRT station. A cool breeze greeted them when they stepped out. Outside, a winding, uphill dirt path cut into a lush jungle. It was not, as Harris thought, the Pan-Island Expressway. He could not tell what it was, for all he could see was a clearing the size of half a football field, and a large hill that cast a shadow upon the entrance of the MRT station. A concrete footpath from the station continued in steps up the hill.

The other students were streaming out from the station as well, with one or two being dragged out, wailing, by their parents.

Harris looked at Hamid and took a step onto the field. His feet sank into brown, squishy soil.

“It’s a mudPIE,” Hamid told Harris a few seconds too late.

“Yeah, I realised,” Harris said, disgustedly inspecting the mulch on his shoes. The boy jumped back onto the footpath. “Mak Kau!” Harris exclaimed, pointing his satay stick at his shoes. Magically, the mud disappeared, and his school-issued shoes reverted to being as white as an ang moh drinking kombucha.

Harris took another step towards the hill, which some of the kids were already ascending. Hamid, however, stayed where he was.

“I’ll have to leave you here,” said the large man. “Just head into the castle. Teachers there will direct you. I’ll see you in a bit, Harris. This is not goodbye.”

“Where will you go?”

“I have to enter from the staff entrance, but I’ll see you at the New Year Feast.”

“Where is the staff entrance?”

Hamid put his satay stick against his beard. “Right here,” he replied, before chanting, “Aku Teleport Siol!” The large man disappeared. This time, it was not with the unfortunate-sounding “Poop!” that was a result of exposure to the residual miasma of the Chan Mali Chan spell. Instead, it was with what sounded like a whoosh combined with an angelic choir, suggesting he was going to a better place.

The other students were clearly children of the magical world, for they regarded Hamid’s disappearance with disinterest before trekking up the hill. Harris followed them. He struggled more than the others, who had parents and siblings to help carry their belongings.

“This is part of the Hog-Tak-Halal-What experience,” said one father to his child. “You climb the hill to the castle. It is symbolic of your rising out of your childhood, into magical maturity.”

Another said to his child, “I paid eighty dollars for those shoes! If you get mud on it ah, I will smack you!”

After a strenuous five-minute trek up the hill—with Harris struggling to carry his heavy luggage bag and the cage containing Hedgefund—the grey spires of Hog-Tak-Halal-What loomed into Harris’ view. The more he walked, the more the castle presented itself. It was equal parts walled fortress, equal parts bastion of medieval European architecture that had somehow found its way to this part of Southeast Asia.

The non-magical population of Singapore could not see it, however. It was not because they were too busy following social media influencers to notice a monstrosity of a castle in their midst, but because Hog-Tak-Halal-What was hidden from plain, non-magical view by spells and enchantments. One of them was Enblocus Myballsomora, which protected it from ridiculous property valuation and unexpected urban replanning.

For Harris bin Potter, this land represented a fresh start, and a different—perhaps

better—existence than the one he had with the Palliterations. The promise of a better life away from his relatives gave him much mirth, so much so that he was not perturbed by the peculiarities of the magical world.

Off towards his right was a towering elder tree, gnarled and ancient and with more branches than 7-Eleven, and it was moving. Its branches swayed this way and that, hitting passing birds by accident, causing indignant squawks to rent the air.

Up above, the occasional whooshes of flying broomsticks could be heard, accompanied by the whoops of their riders.

There were many children walking the grounds. It was easy to spot his fellow newcomers. The students were all dressed in fresh new baju kurung, and they studied the castle with awe.

Harris could now see two grand oaken doors towering over the robed students as they streamed into the school. This was the great Doubledoor, and as he made his way through, he was greeted with a magnificent stone interior lit by ornate chandeliers. On the walls hung lavish paintings of wizards wearing vibrant baju kurung and holding mighty satay sticks aloft. They appeared to be in locales that seemed foreign and familiar all at once—palm trees and angkana trees, expanses of grass, the sky unscraped by concrete grey. Harris marvelled at the grandeur of it all. He welcomed this change from the dank interior of the Palliterations' kitchen sink cabinet.

In his ecstatic reverie at the magnificence of Hog-Tak-Halal-What's castle interiors, he did not notice a tall, red-haired boy walking his way until he bumped into him and their respective items were strewn across the stone floor. "I'm so sorry," Harris said.

"It's all good, brother." The boy's eyes then flicked towards the scar on Harris' forehead. "Harris bin Potter?"

"Yeah."

"Fandi Ahmad's bootlaces! It really is you! You're a legend, bro!"

Harris smiled sheepishly. "No, lah. How am I a legend?"

“You defeated...That-Evil-Bastard-Lah-You-Should-Know-Who-I’m-Talking-About. They sing songs about you!”

“Yeah, well, they sing songs about Mary’s little lamb, and it’s probably a carpet and some lamb chops now.”

The red-haired boy laughed, and clapped Harris on his shoulder. “Sial lah bro, you’re the people’s hero! It is really great to meet you, siol!”

Harris smiled politely. “It is really great to meet you too.” He gestured to Hedgefund’s cage. “This is my pet parrot, Hedgefund.”

“Squawk! Fuckface murtabak!” Hedgefund squawked.

“I’m Ali,” the curly-haired redhead said to Harris, shaking his hand as vigorously as he ignored the parrot. “Ali Evadass Izfarq. But you can call me Ron.”

Harris tried to make the connection. Harris blinked. He tried to make the connection again.

“Why ‘Ron’?” he asked.

Before Harris’ new friend could reply, an elderly Indian lady near the Doubledoor said loudly, “First years, this way!” She ushered them down a narrow corridor and into a holding room full of other first years. Some looked fearful and apprehensive. Some had begun forming cliques. But they all stopped talking when Harris and Ron entered. Excited whispers replaced the nebulous buzz of chatter.

“Is that...?”

“No way!”

“It’s Harris bin Potter! It’s the boy who tak mati siol!”

“Do you think he remembers what That-Evil-Bastard-Lah-You-Should-Know-Who-I’m-Talking-About looks like?”

“It really is him!”

Harris and Ron took their seats behind a shock of long bushy hair that they hoped was attached to a person. Ron, who was from a large family, enjoyed this newfound attention he was receiving, even if by proxy.

“So yeah,” Harris said, ignoring the blatant stares in his direction. “Why ‘Ron’?”

Ron took a moment to detach himself from the attention. “When I was in kindergarten, I had this elderly Hainanese teacher. And every time I showed her my work, she would say that everything was incorrect. But I was sure I did it right, so I got a bit defensive. And she would always shout back, ‘No, I correct! YOU is ron!’ My brothers turned it into a nickname, and it stuck.”

“It’s not a very Malay name,” Harris pointed out, flicking his gaze towards the boy’s red hair. “Do people get confused about your ethnicity because of it?”

The bushy hair in front of them stirred and turned. A freckled girl with a generally intense disposition faced them. “That’s the problem, isn’t it?” she said in the voice of someone who was very used to having her way.

“What is?” Harris asked.

“That a name has a Malay quality to it. I changed my name recently,” she said, as if that sort of thing fit into casual conversation with people she had just met.

“Oh?” Harris said, suddenly imagining a more radical, Caucasian name for himself. He toyed with the idea of “Danny Rad Cliff”, but thought of people in movies plummeting off cliffs to their deaths, and decided that cliffs were, in fact, not very rad. “Hello, anyway, I’m Harris—”

“Harris bin Potter, I know,” the girl said, almost dismissively.

“What was your name before?” Ron asked politely.

“My name was Siti Aminah,” the girl replied, as though saying her name stabbed at her tongue. “Siti Aminah binte Janggut. But I feared my flagrantly Malay Muslim name would be detrimental to my progress in a future career. Statistically, Malay women as a demographic hold the fewest executive jobs in the secular, private sector. So I thought I should change my name to something more secular.”

“Sial lah, a lot of people won’t be too happy hearing what you just said,” Ron pointed out. “Especially Malay feminists. They exist, you know. And they wear tudungs, too.”

Harris asked, “So what did you change your name to?”

“Well, since I intend to pursue a career in International Magic, I thought I should change my name to one inspired by International Runes,” the girl formerly known as Siti Aminah replied. International Runes should not be confused with Ancient Runes, which is a runic language still used in Britain. She continued, “So I chose the International Runic name that means ‘a girl of intelligence, confidence and emotional strength’, which is...”

She looked expectantly at the two boys.

“Justout Beaver?” Ron offered.

“No, you idiot!”

“Nicki Minaj?” Harris suggested. The girl was already shaking her head at “Nicki”.

“It’s Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, obviously!” the girl said haughtily.

“Yes,” Ron said. “Of course. Obviously I knew that.”

Harris cleared his throat. “You know, in the Malay language, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut translates to Her-My-Knee.”

If you listened closely, you might hear a canon misfiring.



A singer, a teacher and a dark wizard walk into a bar. They pass a rabbi, a priest and an imam on their way out. For reasons of political correctness, the imam had not ordered any alcohol during his time in the bar.

The place was mostly empty, except for the grizzled barkeep, a man at the bar and a horse tethered to the stool next to his.

“Why the long face?” the singer asked the horse; something the horse, the man next to the horse and horses as a species did not appreciate. The singer chuckled at his own joke. His peers did not. They took their seats at the far end of the bar, where the shadows were more pronounced and shrouded their sinister intentions.

“Three tequila shots, please,” said the teacher, twitching nervously.

“A graveyard,” said the dark wizard, imposing and terrifying.

“An appletini,” said the singer in his high-pitched sing-song voice.

As the bartender went about preparing their drinks, the dark wizard spoke. “Thank you, gentlemen, for agreeing to meet today.”

The singer made a dismissive sound. “This better be good. I have rehearsals, you know. And three Instagram stories to post.” His eyes studied the teacher. “And who’s this trainwreck?... Hi, I’m sure you’ve heard of me. I’m Justout Beaver, international superstar.” The singer reached out his hand.

The teacher simply quivered in his seat, his eye darting this way and that, completely ignoring the offered hand. He muttered something but his speech was severely impeded by his clear anxiety.

“What did you say?” asked the dark wizard, his annoyance blatant and terrible.

“H-how are y-you alive, Lord Oldermat? D-d-didn’t Harris bin Potter, you know...”

“What, kill me?” The dark wizard emitted an evil cackle. “He weakened me, greatly, yes, but no Malay toddler can defeat me!” His companions wondered

why he was laughing when the mere fact that a toddler could weaken him was cause enough for some serious reflection.

The bartender came and served their drinks. For the duration of one tequila shot, a gulp of graveyard and a sip of an appletini, none of the men said anything.

“What happened that night?” asked the singer, trying to sound as unwilling as possible to ask the question. “The night the bin Potters died?”

The teacher scoffed, but did it through a series of nervous quivers, diminishing the overall effect. “You’re clearly a new f-follower of the dark lord. S-s-some of us-us h-have been following h-him since the f-f-f-first days.”

“S-s-s-shut up,” the singer sang his return. “I want to know.”

“I find no harm sharing it,” Lord Oldermat said smoothly. “I don’t know what it is about that boy. His parents were trained mata-magics, the best of the force, like Jon Snow to the Night’s Watch.”

“Or Aragorn to the Rangers of the North,” offered the singer.

“Or-or-or H-Harry Potter to the Order—”

“SILENCE!” cried Lord Oldermat. “Do not speak of that which you know nothing of!”

“F-f-forgive m-m-me, my lord.”

The dark wizard glared the teacher down. His temperament cooled quickly, and he continued, “I killed the bin Potters easily, but for some reason, when I cast Chan Mali Chan upon Harris, the spell rebounded, and I became a ghost.”

“A-a-a g-g-g-ghost?” This time, it was the singer.

“And not the gothic, charming kind that gets to wander around large houses and haunt fools,” said the dark wizard regrettably. “I was just invisible. I could not be seen, I could not let myself be known to others. I could not interact with the world around me. For nearly ten years, that was my existence.”

“What changed?” asked the singer.

“Last year, one of my most loyal followers crafted a magical receptacle that would suck and store all of the world’s hatred and transmute it into life-force. He tethered my soul to the receptacle. Within weeks, we accumulated enough hatred to give me a corporeal body. I think about seventy per cent of that hate came from a person named Donald Trump.” Lord Oldermat downed the rest of his graveyard. “We meet today so I can return to full power.”

Justout Beaver sipped his appletini and gave Lord Oldermat’s words some consideration. “What do you need from me? What do you need from us?”

Lord Oldermat smiled at the two, and told them his plans. They listened. Later they both nodded. Justout Beaver did so for the scheme’s sheer audacity and cruelty, and also because it would help him sell albums. The teacher agreed mainly because his mother had told him many times that he needed to make friends, and it was especially nice to have one who would be very, very, very, very close to him.

Lord Oldermat stepped outside the bar alone. In his black robes, he looked tall and thin, his movements nearly serpentine. Across the road, he spotted a rabbi, a priest and an imam gathered around the carcass of a chicken that had clearly been mowed down by a vehicle while attempting to cross the road.

“We should bury this chicken,” said the priest.

They carried the chicken to a nearby park. The rabbi and the imam started to dig a small grave for the deceased fowl, while the priest held a portable lamp so they could see in the dark of the night.

As the night wore on, the lamp began to flicker out.

“You need to change the light bulb,” said the imam to the priest.

“I can’t!” replied the priest. “I’m just one person.”

The imam pushed his shovel into the ground. “How many of you does it take to change a light bulb?” he demanded.

“Five! One to find a new light bulb, three to—”

“Just use your phone’s flashlight!” said the imam, his voice carrying into the

night.

The rabbi shushed them. “Quiet, you two! Someone’s coming!”

The two snapped to silence, and sure enough, in the vacuum absent of their voices, the sound of a barely-alive dark wizard slithering his way to them could be heard.

When he was near enough, Lord Oldermat called out, “Knock, knock!”

“Who’s there?” asked the imam.

“You know,” said the wizard.

“You know who?” the priest proffered.

“Exactly. Chan Mali Chan!” cried Lord Oldermat, pointing his satay stick at them.

The imam’s forehead creased. “I don’t get—” He was unable to finish his sentence because he no longer had a forehead, for his entire head was exploding very gruesomely, very bloodily and very suddenly.

Unable to help himself, the priest cried out, “Sial lah!” and disappeared into thin air.

12 As this was the North-Down line, the four stops in question were Toa Payoh Magic Commune, Kramat Underground, Lorong Very Very Very Times Infinity Halus and Sembah the Bawang.



Chapter 8: The Sorting Songkok

In Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a door swung open, and a cacophony of prepubescent chatter streamed into the holding room, swelled and then died as the door shut again.

The stern, elderly lady from before had entered the room, followed by a small procession of straggling first-year students. She was olive-skinned, with cheekbones that could cut glass and a high forehead that suggested erudition, wisdom and similar cerebral associations.

“Children, take your seats!” she said in a voice that effortlessly held authority.

The first years sat, and a respectful hush fell over them.

“Welcome to Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I am so happy to see all of you here,” the teacher continued with an unseasoned smile. “I am Professor Munira McGonertall. In a bit, you will join your teachers and schoolmates in the Great Hall, but you must first go through a time-honoured tradition here: the Sorting Ceremony.”

The students broke into excited whispers.

“There are four Houses here at Hog-Tak-Halal-What: Fandi, Haikel, Halimah and Trump. Your House will be an integral part of your life here. Your classes, your dorms, your friends—they will all be determined in this very Sorting Ceremony.” She added ominously, “So choose wisely.”

Harris glanced at Ron and hoped they would end up in the same House. He wondered if they would be chosen in sequence, and if so, he tried to find a way to put three other students between him and Ron.

“Do any of you have any questions? Raise your hands if you do.”

A student—a pudgy, nervous-looking boy in faded hand-me-down robes—raised his hand. “P-professor McGonertall?”

“It’s Professor McConanmall. Yes?” asked Professor McConeheadall. “Nabil, I believe?”

“Yes, Nabil Pantatpanjang.”¹³ The boy spoke as if nobody wanted to hear his voice. He spoke softly and quickly, keen to finish as soon as he could. “How do we choose our houses?”

“The Sorting Songkok will help you decide,” the teacher replied.

“The Sorting what?” Harris asked Ron.

Ron smiled at his new friend. “Chill lah, brother. You will see later.”

“Can we change Houses after deciding?” asked an Indian girl, who spoke in a British accent. Harris noticed that there was another girl who looked exactly like her standing to her right. In this magical world, Harris wondered if they were twins, or if it was one person moving left and right very quickly, or if there was a spell to conjure doppelgängers.

“No, Ms Petal, you cannot. Once you’ve been sorted, you will remain in the House for the remainder of your time in this school.”

A blonde boy near the back of the room said loudly, “I’m fine with that. Trump for life! Yeah!”

A few other students joined him in shouting “Trump, Trump, Trump” triumphantly, while the rest pointed and sniggered.

“Any further questions?”

“What’s your name again?” asked the blonde boy.

“Raise your hands if you’d like to ask a question,” she said sternly.

The boy raised his hand. “What’s your name again?”

“Professor Munira McGoontamall,” she replied calmly.

The boy raised his hand again.

“Yes?”

“What’s your name?”

“I’ve already told you. It’s Professor Munira McGringottstall,” she said, her patience clearly strained.

The boy raised his hand one more time. Those immediately around him seemed to find this amusing. Harris, Ron, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and Professor Munira McYawnatoll clearly did not.

But the professor continued with admirable restraint. “If there are no intelligent questions, then I would like all of you to form a line and follow me.”

The children did as they were told. Harris and his two new friends were in the middle, with the obnoxious blonde boy far at the back.

Professor McGroaningcall led them out to the castle’s vestibule and traversed it into the Great Hall, a vast chamber lit by magnificent chandeliers hanging from a high, ornate ceiling that could, at will, turn transparent to show the sky above. Girls wearing skirts would do well not to walk on the roof. It would not be advisable for boys wearing skirts to walk on the roof as well, for that matter.

The first years walked past eight long rows of tables filled with students. Every two tables were decorated with the same colour: red, blue, green and gold. Some students wore brown baju kurung, some wore the colours of their respective tables, some of them wore robes. They were chatting excitedly, pointing at the first years. Harris realised, to his slight chagrin, that they were focusing their attention mostly on him, giggling and tapping one another enthusiastically and gasping.

At the front of this Great Hall, there was a long wooden table of adults who Harris assumed were the teachers of Hog-Tak-Halal-What. Among them, Harris noticed happily, was Hamid. He waved at the large man, who waved back. Hamid was seated next to an old wizard dressed in purple pyjama robes and cowboy boots. This old wizard with a great white beard was sleeping. Next to him sat a sinister-looking wizard with long floppy hair and a surly, dyspeptic disposition.

“Who’s the man in the blue cowboy boots?” Harris asked Ron.

“Brother, those boots are not blue. They’re obviously purple.”

“You’re both wrong,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut haughtily. “They’re fuchsia.”

“Fooch what?”

“Fuchsia, Ron. Fuchsia.”

“How do you spell that?”

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut told him.

Ron processed the spelling. “Fuck sia,” he said finally.

“Ron! Just because you don’t know a word doesn’t mean you have to swear! We’re only on our first day at school!”

Harris had to agree with Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“Eh I’m not cursing lah! Isn’t that how it should be pronounced? F-U-C-H, S-I-A.” Ron repeated his interpretation of the pronunciation of fuchsia.

“Guys, come on! I just want to know who that old man in the cowboy boots is!”

“You don’t know who that is?” asked Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, as if Harris had just asked if the Pope was a Caucasian Catholic man.

“Am I supposed to know?”

“Are students supposed to know who their school principal is?”

“He’s our principal?” Harris blurted out. “He looks like he’s been principal since Sir Stamford Raffles was here.” Considering that this was his first step into the magical world, that might not be far from the truth.

“I don’t know if he’s been here that long, but he was my dad’s principal as well. That’s Pakcik Dollah,” said Ron, looking reverently at the old man, despite his misgivings about the fuchsia boots.

Professor McConeandcowl made the first years bunch together next to the teachers’ table. “Wait here,” she told them. She turned to face the gathered students, and as soon as she did, all sounds—whispers, giggles, chatter—stopped. There was an impenetrable reverence that she commanded among the

students, and Harris had the feeling that the blonde boy might have been let off easy.

At the front of the hall, before the teachers' table, was a nicely polished cedar stool. A piece of black cloth was draped over it. The cloth appeared to cover something oval, no taller than a can of soft drink.

The first years were told to queue behind this stool. After they did, Professor Munira addressed the entire hall. "A time-honoured tradition here at Hog-Tak-Halal-What requires every first year to get sorted." The professor pulled at the cloth and revealed a velvet songkok, black with royal blue trimmings, smooth, stationary, a perfect oval. "Sorting is decided by the Sorting Songkok!"

This unveiling seemed to excite the older Hog-Tak-Halal-What students, who cheered happily for the songkok—which was a strange thing to do for a songkok, whatever the occasion.

Professor Munira McCadoodlecall continued, "There is nothing you can hide from the Sorting Songkok, for it will know you. It knows your thoughts, your hopes and fears. It knows your personalities, and it will factor all of these when sorting you into your houses."

How would a freakin' songkok determine the personalities of the first years? Maybe they had to try and pull a kampong chicken from it, Harris thought. Or a rabbit. Yeah, maybe a rabbit.

Professor Munira's voice jolted him out of his thoughts. "First years, listen! As I've told you earlier, there are four Houses here at Hog-Tak-Halal-What: Fandi, Haikel, Halimah and Trump."

Harris glanced at Ron. What would it take for them to end up in the same house, he wondered.

"But to begin the Sorting Ceremony, I would like to introduce you to the Sorting Songkok!"

The seated students erupted in cheers again. Harris found this behaviour very peculiar. Sure, it was a pretty nice songkok, but nothing about it warranted the kind of joyous celebration it had garnered from the students of Hog-Tak-Halal-What.

But the cheers stopped suddenly.

Then, the songkok twitched. A rip at the front opened wide like a mouth—and the songkok began to sing:

“Oh you might not think I’m jambu

But do not judge me on what you see

Besides, I’m just a freakin’ songkok

How jambu can I be?

I am not some random ethnic headgear

You should know this from the start

For I am the Sorting Songkok

Of Hog-Tak-Halal-What!

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be—

In one of four houses named for

The founders of this academy:

You might belong in Fandi

If you possess charm and will

When it comes to void deck soccer

They rule with unerring skill;

Perhaps get it down with Haikel

*Where they are really cool
These groovy kids in blues
Are the best musicians in school;
Or yet Halimah House
Where the clever get it on
Here, the term 'smart mat'
Is not an oxymoron;
Last and least is Trump
Where they really value gold
I will be honest—if you go there,
You're likely an asshole.
So put me on, little one,
Do not be afraid!
I promise I will not swallow
When you give me head."*

The students of Hog-Tak-Halal-What, obviously used to seeing a songkok sing, whooped and hollered. This was possibly the most celebrated headwear Harris had ever seen, and this included the mitre, which Harris thought looked like an elaborate bird's nest touched by Midas.

The first years were abuzz with excited chatter about which Houses they wanted to end up in. Within minutes, they could be with the scarlets that ennobled Fandi House, the cool blues that identified Haikel, the bright greens of Halimah, or the gaudy gold of Trump. Harris himself was enamoured with the idea of aligning

himself with Fandi, who, as he found out later, was so amazing an athlete that he never had to use his discreetly hidden magical powers for sporting purposes.

“First years,” said Professor Munira. “When I call your name, you are to sit on this stool, and place the Sorting Songkok on your head. Understood?”

They nodded as one.

“Good. First up!” Professor Munira McGonnacall conjured a clipboard with her satay stick and read off it. “Ahmad Santiago!”

A burly, curly-haired boy rose and confidently strode to the stool. He placed the Sorting Songkok on his head, and almost immediately, it shouted, “Haikel!”

“Amity Ville,” the professor called, and yet another first year made her way to the stool with small, jittery steps.

With everyone’s attention focused on the sorting, the blonde Malay boy from earlier—the one who had asked for Professor McGonergirl’s name twice—made his way from the back of the line to Harris. Harris found that he disliked the boy almost immediately. He, the blonde boy, had pushed two other first years out of his way, and walked with an air of privilege.

“Harris bin Potter, it is good to meet you,” the boy said. “Name’s Malfay.” He offered a hand.

Harris reluctantly shook it. “This is Ron.”

“Hello, Tron.”

“It’s Ron.”

“Whatever.”

“And this is Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.”

“I’m not going to remember that,” said Malfay.

“Interesting name you have,” Harris cut in, diplomatically. “Malfay.”

“Yes. It’s Malay,” he drawled, “with an F.”

Harris sighed. “Isn’t it always?”

“What?”

“Nothing. So what’s your first name?”

“Donnie Darko,” replied Donnie Darko Malfay. “My friends call me Double-D—you can call me Double-D.” Harris cringed at Donnie Darko’s nickname. It gave him mental images of anthropomorphised rabbits with large hooters. These images then morphed into anthropomorphised owls with large hooters and it amused him for a while. The anthropomorphised owls go on to morph into anthropomorphised hammers with large knockers, which made him snicker. Finally, they morphed into anthropomorphised water decanters with large jugs, and this was the sign that Harris had taken the joke too far.

“Billy Idle!” Professor McGuncontrol’s voice cut into their conversation.

As the skinny Billy, whose eyes were so big, it seemed like he was just Eyes Without A Face, got sorted into Haikel House, Double-D said, “I hope we’ll end up together in Trump, Harris! Five generations of my family have been in Trump House. That’s where you and I belong, where the strong and powerful are. I think we would make a great team in Trump. Imagine me and you on the quidditch team!”

Harris was beginning to really not like this Donnie Darko Malfay character. “With all due respect, I feel more inclined to Fandi House. Also, I don’t even know what a quidditch is,” he said. “Besides, I play football.”

“So do I!” Ron chimed in from behind Harris.

“Who are you?” Double-D asked venomously.

“You can call me Ron. Can I call you Double-D?”

“No.” Double-D gave Ron a twice-over, before fixating his eyes on Ron’s red hair. “Red hair, pasar malam clothes. You’re an Izfarq, aren’t you?” He had said “Izfarq” like a Star Wars fan might say “Jar Jar Binks”. With an obnoxious lift of his nose, Donnie Darko Malfay added, “I’ve had the displeasure of meeting your dad when I visited my father at work. Your dad calls my father ‘boss’.”

As Ron was fumbling for a comeback, Harris stepped forward, imitated Double-D's mannerisms and sneered, "Blonde hair, ridiculously expensive clothes. You're Lady Gaga aren't you? I've had the pleasure of meeting your mum." With another step towards Malfay, Harris added, "Your mum calls me daddy."

The students around them were in an uproar at the impending Yo Momma battle. "Oh, no he didn't!"

"Let me give you some advice, Harris bin Potter," drawled Double-D. "There are some magical families you do not want to be associated with. Wanna know the difference between a bench and Ron's father?"

Harris considered this. "Where do I even begin? A bench has four legs while Ron's father has two. A bench can be made of a whole host of materials from wood to plastic to metal, but Ron's father is organic. A bench cannot sing 'Majulah Singapura', but I'm pretty sure he can. A bench has no penis but—"

"Okay, enough! I got it! The answer I was looking for is: a bench can support a family, but Ron's father cannot."

Next to the seething Ron, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut chipped in, "You have a pretty narrow view of the meaning of 'difference'."

"You're a buzzkill," Double-D Malfay said to the girl. "Wanna make out?"

"Ew, no!"

Double-D shrugged. Then he noticed her clothes, her bag, her shoes. "Your parents are kosongs, aren't they?"

"Kosongs?" Harris asked uncertainly. Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut looked like she wanted to pour hot curry into Double-D's pants, and not in a sexy way.

"Non-magic folk," Double-D spat. "Kosongs. Empty. Like the worst kind of roti prata."

"I don't know, bro," said Ron. "One time I saw a Skittles roti prata."

"Nobody asked for your opinion, Ron. Why don't you go Izfarq yourself?"

Before Ron could say anything (or, if the redhead had his way, throw a punch), Professor McGerundfall called loudly, “Donnie Darko Malfay!”

The blonde boy threw his nose into the air, spun around and made his way to the stool. The songkok had barely touched Malfay’s head when it shouted, “Trump!” Loud cheers erupted from the gold end of the Great Hall. Someone held up a sign that read, “Trump House: Making Hog-Tak-Halal-What great again.” Malfay was instantly popular: the two Trump tables rose as he walked down. Those whom he passed and gave high fives to were hysterical with delight.

A few students later, Professor McGongongcha cried, “Ali Evadass Iz— Is that really your name?”

“Yes, but you can call me Ron.” Ron headed to the stool and placed the Sorting Songkok on his head.

“Ugh, you don’t need a house. You need shampoo!” muttered the Sorting Songkok as it was cushioned upon Ron’s head. “Right, right. FANDI!” Harris punched the air as the red corner of the Great Hall erupted into manic cheers. Harris saw a few redheads at Fandi table rise and hug Ron—they must be his siblings.

Later, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was also sorted into Fandi, more for will, Harris was sure, than for charm. Even so, it made Harris want to be part of Fandi even more. He guessed being a member of Halimah or Haikel would not be so bad—anything but Trump. The gold tables were the only ones who booed when other students were placed in houses that were not Trump.

Only six were left unsorted among the first years when the professor called, “Harris bin Potter!” This caused the entire Great Hall to explode into excited whispers.

“Is it really?”

“The boy who tak mati, siol!”

“It’s actually him!”

“He’s shorter than I expected though.”

Harris swallowed and moved to the stool. The hall seemed to draw a collective breath of anticipation as Harris sat down and placed the Sorting Songkok on his head.

“Mmm, mmm, what do we have here?” Harris heard the songkok say in a gravelly voice. “I see vestiges of the great Donald J. Trump in this one.”

“Please no,” Harris pleaded.

“But why not, young one? Mmm, Fandi appeals more to you? I see it all in your head, Harris bin Potter. Your parents were both members of the House of Fandi, if I recall correctly. And of course, I recall correctly! I am the Sorting Songkok, after all!”

This revelation cemented it for Harris: there was only one house for him now. “Please Fandi, please Fandi.” Harris was practically begging under his breath.

The Sorting Songkok was still in the midst of its monologue. “I wonder if anybody has noticed the inherent sexism in this system—there is no Sorting Tudung. I guess it would be a logistical nightmare, having to wear a tudung and then undo it everytime a sorting happens. What do you think? Well, I guess you’re right—that’s a discussion for another day. Yes, I just read that from your mind. I am THE Sorting Songkok. So Harris, dear boy. I SHALL PUT YOU IN —”

Harris took a deep breath.

The students in the Great Hall, as one, took a deep breath.

The staff seated behind Harris took a deep breath.

On the roof, a girl in a skirt peeping at proceedings took a deep breath. Next to her, a boy in a skirt took a deep breath.

Harnessing the kind of biology that only exists in fantasies or parodies, the Sorting Songkok, too, took a deep breath.

The nanosecond of silence that followed seemed to stretch to eternity.

“FANDI HOUSE!”

A deafening roar of cheers filled the Great Hall, originating from the Fandi table. Some got on their feet and began dancing a jig. The rest punched the air, or whooped in delight.

“We have Harris bin Potter! We have Harris bin Potter!” they yelled and yelled.

“FANDI HOUSE HAS HARRIS BIN POTTER!”

13 Malay: long bottom, literally, which, of course, is a reference to the character of the Hungarian longtail dragon in that British novel about a young boy who became a wizard.



Chapter 9: First Class

The furore finally died down when the last student to be sorted, Zsazsa Beach Boys, took her place at Haikel House. The Great Hall was abuzz with conversation—the older students were speaking to the newcomers, welcoming them to their respective houses.

Harris, too, was getting to know the more senior students in Fandi House when he heard the thuds of fuchsia cowboy boots and the pop-boom of a lectern being conjured magically. Harris turned.

The absolutely ancient man who was sleeping earlier—their school principal—now stood at a plain wooden lectern where the songkok once was. A stylised “HTHW”—obviously an acronym for the school—was emblazoned upon the lectern.

Everyone, everything fell silent, as though the universe itself ceased its perpetual humming to prepare for what was to come. Harris was surprised at the rapt attention paid to this man.

“Good morning, students and teachers of Hog-Tak-Halal-What!” His voice boomed throughout the Great Hall, deep and powerful, and completely incompatible with his wizened frame. “I am your Headmaster, Airbus Dinosaur. You can call me Pakcik Dollah. We will get to our New Year’s feast in a bit, but first, I’ve prepared a speech to welcome all of you to a new school year.” In most settings, the children would have groaned. But the students of Hog-Tak-Halal-What were intensely focused.

The old man extracted a roll of parchment from inside his robe, and began reading, his voice regal and grave. “My anaconda don’t...” Harris wondered what the foremost authority in school meant by that. Then, Pakcik Dollah repeated it again: “My anaconda don’t...”

Confused murmurs rippled amongst the students. Harris thought that perhaps the Headmaster was opening with a postmodern poem.

“My anaconda don’t,” said the old man, “want none unless you got buns hun.”

The students stared, most of them with their jaws dropped.

“Oh my gosh, look at her butt,” their Headmaster pressed on, clear, ringing, authoritative. “Oh my gosh, look at her butt. Oh my gosh, look at her butt. Look at, look at, look at, look at her butt.”

Professor Munira rushed from his side and whispered urgently to the Headmaster.

The old wizard looked like a deer caught in the headlights of a monster truck. “Right! Oh dear! I must have mixed up my speech with the lyrics to my favourite song.” He began rummaging in his robes. “Now where is that thing?”

He then withdrew a thick brown satay stick, pointed it towards his robes and chanted, “Lai Lai, speech!”

A piece of rolled-up parchment flew from the crotch of his pants into his hands. The old wizard unrolled it, with the unerring skill of someone who ate spring rolls by unrolling them and eating its ingredients individually.

“Ah, that’s much better. So welcome, welcome!” he muttered to the paper. Pakcik Dollah looked up at the assembly, and addressed them: “Welcome to a brand new school year! Just a few reminders: Those of you who are spreading rumours about a Forbidden Forest, you need to freakin’ stop. This is Singapore. We have no forests. Also, the collection of trees that make up what you call a forest are very offended.

“Secondly, all pets are to be kept inside your dorms at all times. If any pets are found outside of the dorms, I will claim them as my own, and dress them in Burberry and give them Transformers names like Munchgears or Poodiebox. That’s all I have to say. I guess it’s time to makan!”¹⁴

The school applauded their Headmaster, but stopped when they saw him stop short and return to the front of the Great Hall.

“Oh wait, I forgot to say one more thing!” said Pakcik Dollah apologetically. “I also need to remind all of you that the seventh room on the seventh floor of the northeastern spire is off limits to everyone.” He said the last four words

emphatically, his index finger jabbing the air as though it gave those words more weight. “Unless you want to receive the kind of psychological scars that will remain with you for the rest of your life.” With that, the old wizard danced a small jig before heading to the teachers’ table.

The students broke out into urgent whispers, each with their own theories about whatever could be in that room. Harris caught wind of dragons, immortality elixirs and George R. R. Martin’s manuscript for a new Game of Thrones book. As the Headmaster sat down at the teacher’s table, Harris thought he saw Pakcik Dollah wink at him.

The students spent the rest of the feast discussing the possible contents of the forbidden room.

After the feast, the Heads of Houses led the first years to their respective dormitories. Fandi’s was Professor Munira, who led them to the far end of the castle, to the spire furthestmost from the entrance, before heading down two floors.

Eventually, she guided them to a large painting of a handsome Malay footballer in the midst of shimmying past a defender. “Password?” asked the footballer as he got past his opponent, and passed to an off-frame teammate.

“Scissors kick.”

“Beats paper kick, but not rock kick,” said the footballer in the painting. The entire painting—frame and all—swung aside to reveal a narrow corridor that led into the Fandi House common room.

Harris stepped into a room with wood-panelled walls, oriental carpets and furnishings with scarlet touches. Two staircases led up and away at the far end of the common room into, according to a sign painted on the wall beside each staircase, the girls’ and boys’ dormitories. A female prefect led Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and the other girls up to their dormitories, while Professor Munira led the boys into theirs.

“Welcome to your dorms,” the professor said to the boys. “This is where you’ll be sleeping for most of your school life. Feel free to take whichever bed you like.”

Harris took a bed at the corner of the room, next to Ron's. The professor waved a satay stick, and their belongings magically materialised next to their chosen beds. Hedgefund squawked, "Took you long enough, you fucking fungus!"

"Do any of you have questions?" Professor McSaunaball asked the first years.

Harris raised his hand. "Professor Munira, what's in the seventh room of the seventh floor of the northeastern spire?"

"Ah very well, no questions then," she said dismissively and left hurriedly.

As soon as he lay onto his bed, however, he forgot about his question. The bed was magical. He had never felt this much comfort before. Harris slept early that night; the boy who once had to squeeze into a mouldy, damp kitchen sink cabinet never had a good night's sleep the way he did those first months away from the Palliterations.

At midnight, Hedgefund screeched, "You're in fucking danger, you stupid asshole!"

"Shut up," Harris mumbled sleepily.

The next morning at slightly past six, they were awoken by a third-year prefect. "Get up, newbies!" he crowed. Harris sat up quickly, a trait ingrained in him after mornings of Cik Petom slamming the doors of the kitchen sink cabinet. The prefect moved from bed to bed, slapping the mattresses and kicking the bed frames. "Rise and shine for your first day in Hog-Tak-Halal-What!" As the first years rose out of their beds, the prefect started handing out their timetables. "Breakfast begins at 7.30, and your first class begins at 9!" the prefect continued. "Don't be late for any of your classes, or points will be deducted from Fandi House, and we do not want that, do we?"

Ron and Harris' first class was Spelling, taught by a Professor Flickdick. Then, it was Social Studies with Professor Shila. The final lesson of the day was at 3pm, Magical Philosophy taught by Professor Pooh Quimak. The rest of the week promised a myriad of magical and non-magical classes: Magical History in Contemporary Asia (also with Professor Flickdick), English, Magic and Science, and Satay Stick Theorems.

"We have a whole class dedicated to Spelling? They retarded or what?" Ron said

as he crushed his timetable into a paper ball. He then dropped it towards his feet, and kicked it right into the wastepaper bin at the entrance of their dormitory.

“Why not combine it with English?”

“Maybe it’s a different kind of spelling,” Harris suggested, slipping his timetable neatly into his bag. “Like magical spells.”

“I hope so lah. Because if it’s word spelling, they’re wasting my time.”

“Let me test you then,” Harris said.

Ron took the challenge. “Sial lah, lu mau joget? Jom kita joget!”¹⁵

“Spell ‘rendezvous’.”

“Hah,” said Ron cockily. “R-O-N-D-A-Y-V-O-O. Rendezvous.”

“That is so Ron,” Harris said.

After a sumptuous breakfast of nasi lemak and orange juice, they arrived for their first Spelling class a minute before 9am. Professor Flickdick’s classroom was a space-efficient affair. There were no desks or chairs—simply padded walls, whiteboards with spellcasting charts and a window that looked out to the PIE. A corner of the classroom housed a first-aid cabinet. Most of the Fandi House first years were already there, along with other first years in Halimah greens. Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was among them, having begun her day far earlier than everyone else. She waved at the boys, and told them she had been in class for an hour already.

“Doing what?” asked Ron.

“Well, I’ve finished Spelling for First Years or Really Stupid Adults,” she declared happily, holding up a rainbow-coloured textbook. “I think I know most of the first-year spells in our syllabus.”

“Eh sista, don’t spoil market can?” said Ron.

“Self-improvement does not spoil any market, Ron,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said, albeit too haughtily for the boys to understand the wisdom of her defence. “If a ‘market’, as you say, gets spoiled all because of one person within it improving

his or herself, then that market is already spoiled to begin with.”

“Did you understand anything she just said?” Ron asked Harris, after gaping stupidly at Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut in search of a clever retort that could match hers.

Harris shook his head, not keen to be caught in an argument between the two.

They all turned their heads when the classroom door swung open and a short dwarf of a man, wearing a light grey tweed suit and two monocles joined together,¹⁶ waddled in like a penguin.

“Welcome to Spelling, where you will learn how to cast basic magical spells for everyday use,” he said briskly as the students formed a cluster in the middle of the classroom. “I am your teacher, Professor Flickdick. And on that note, I would like each of you to introduce yourselves. Tell us your name, and a bit about yourselves—your interests or ambitions.”

The Halimahs went first: there was the radiantly intelligent Shelby who already had an honorary Astrophysics degree from a kosong university; Aidil, the world’s only politically active eleven-year-old; and a host of other students who seemed to have achieved too much at the tender age of eleven.

The Fandis were a less accomplished bunch. Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut’s Runic Reading certificate was the most impressive accolade. For the boy named Nabil Pantatpanjang, his numerous achievements included Most Times Tripped in Class, Most Untimely Asthma Attacks and Most Incapable of Yoga. Harris also met the American–Indian¹⁷ twins, iPadma and iPodma Petal, who felt being from America was an achievement in itself.

After the introductions, Professor Flickdick said in his mousey voice, “The first spell I’m going to teach you is a simple levitating spell, Wingardium Laviosial.”

As he chanted, he poked his satay stick towards a boy from Halimah House named Nazir, before flicking it in an upward motion. Nazir began to float in the air, rising up near the ceiling where he hung suspended by some invisible force. The class whooped at the display of magic.

“How does it feel up there?” asked Professor Flickdick cheerfully.

“I’ll get the hang of it,” said Nazir calmly.

Professor Flickdick then gently brought Nazir back to the ground, guiding the boy’s descent with his satay stick. He then broke the class into pairs to practise the spell.

Harris was with Nabil Pantatpanjang, while Ron was paired with Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

Nabil and Ron were the first to point their satay sticks at their partners and chant, “Wingardium Laviosial!”

Harris felt himself buffeted slightly off the ground, while only Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut’s hair rose and tangled in on itself.

“It’s not Laviosial, Ron,” she admonished, unknotting her bushy hair. “It’s Laviosial.”

“What is this, an oral exam? Who cares how I say it?”

“The SATAY STICK cares!” Professor Flickdick squealed from across the classroom. “Intone it properly. Wingardium Laviosial!”

By the end of the lesson, Harris and Nabil were doing yoga poses in mid-air, Ron was knocking his head painfully against the ceiling, while Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut’s hair was begging to be featured in a disentangling shampoo commercial.

“That was fun,” Harris said with a smile as they left Professor Flickdick’s class.

“For you,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut sourly. “You try doing it with Mr Hair Tangler here.”

“Come on lah, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, don’t be like that,” said Ron defensively. “I emphasise sial differently. It’s what I grew up with. I was raised Malay. I understand Malay phonetics. You can’t expect a Malay person like me to speak with a non-Malay accent!”

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut simply pointed at herself, a Malay girl who spoke English and cast spells with an ethnically-neutral accent. Looking at Ron, her features eased. “Yeah, I guess I can’t blame you,” she said, sighing. “We could practise

more, though.”

“And we will, don’t worry,” said Ron in his Malay accent.

“I wish we could do more complex spells, though,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“She says after one lesson,” Ron said, chuckling nervously now that the focus was off him.

“We should have a class that teaches us how to protect ourselves from evil magic. Something like, Defence Against Dark Arts.”

“DADA,” Harris abbreviated in apprehension, his eyes wide.

“Defence class? For what?” Ron said incredulously. “We have mata-magics for that kind of thing. We’re eleven! You can’t expect us to learn how to defeat evil adult wizards at our age! Do kosongs teach eleven-year-olds how to use knives and guns in their schools?”

“No,” replied Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“No,” Harris echoed.

“Besides, we have no known threats ever since Harris, you know...”

“Since I what?”

“Killed That-Evil-Bastard-Lah-You-Should-Know-Who-I’m-Talking-About.”

“You mean Lord Oldermat?” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

In response, Ron whimpered. “We do not speak his name!” he hissed. “The two of you spent your lives in the kosong world. We grew up hearing about his nightmarish deeds and his horrible, horrible spells. All of us in the magical world have relatives or friends that he had killed.”

“He killed my parents,” Harris said defiantly. “And I do not fear—
AARRGGHHH!”

Harris had screamed because, as they were walking along the corridor in the western spire to get to their next class, he had accidentally bumped into a teacher

with a shock of wild hair and a bright purple top. The teacher, too, returned the yell with an even more pained, “GAAAH HH SWEET VOLDEMORT’S NOSE!” The teacher then tittered away, hissing with indignation.

“What was that?” asked Ron.

“I have no idea.”

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut snapped them back to the moment. “Let’s go. We don’t want to be late for Social Studies.”

The classroom was a bright, well-lit room six floors above the castle vestibule; getting to it had required climbing six long flights of stairs. After two steps, Ron had already been groaning.

The trio took seats two rows from the floor-to-ceiling chalkboard at the front. Their teacher was at her desk ticking names off a clipboard as students streamed in. Her name was written in large, bold letters on the board: Professor Shila Nothela. Harris was not looking at her, but was instead fixated on the non-Fandi students at the back of the class.

“Ugh, Trump House,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“Hey, Ron!” shouted Double-D, as the rest of Trump House leered at Harris’ red-haired friend. “How was breakfast? I know you and your family like free stuff. It’s the only thing you can afford.”

The Trump first years broke into laughter even though Double-D’s remark was neither a joke nor even funny.

“Shut up, Malfay, or it’s twenty points from Trump,” said Professor Shila, without looking up from her clipboard. This silenced the Trump students.

When Nabil Pantatpanjang staggered into class, looking worse for wear, Social Studies class finally began.

Professor Shila had a pleasing, but stern face. She was an imposing woman, and spoke swiftly, clearly, firmly. “The first thing you need to know for Social Studies to be a positive experience for all of us is this: I have high, but fair, expectations of all of you. If any of you don’t want to spend the whole of next

year in detention, you will need to get at least a CB for your end-year exams.”

Malfay raised his hand, a wide smirk on his face. “Then wouldn’t that be unfair for us, sharing the class with Fandi House?”

“I will be very fair, Mr Donnie Darko. Why would you say that?”

“Because they’re full of CBs!” Donnie Darko and his peers in Trump laughed heartily.

“Five points from Trump,” Professor Shila said with a smirk. Donnie Darko sank back into his seat, scowling. Harris would learn much later that nobody actually kept track of the House points, and teachers liked to flourish additions and subtractions mostly to keep students in line. This was mainly due to the Hog-Tak-Halal-What Fiasco of 1997, when a teacher had deducted points from houses for having students who were “plain butt-ugly”. Now, points were counted solely during inter-house sporting competitions.

“CB is a grade,” Professor Shila said. When she saw the still-confused looks on the students, she added, “Are you all familiar with the grading system in Hog-Tak-Halal-What?”

“Yes,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, but her voice was drowned out by an entire chorus of “no’s”.

Professor Shila sighed exasperatedly. “Take out your notebooks and write this down—this is very important.”

The students did.

“The lowest grade you can get is an FK—fly kite.”

Next to Harris, Ron opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself. Harris guessed that his new friend wanted to ask if it was “a FK” or “an FK”.

“The next grade is a BK.”

“Burger King!” Ron exclaimed despite himself. “Sial lah!”

“Balik kampung,”¹⁸ the professor said, looking pointedly at Ron.

“Oh,” said Ron with a dying high’s sigh. He scribbled in his notebook, just as the rest did.

“Highest failing grade is ROK—Rilek One Korner.”

“The lowest passing grade is WH. What do you think it stands for?”

“Wah Heng ah?” Tim Nonis answered uncertainly.

“Correct!”

“Wah heng ah.”

“The second passing grade—which is the minimum I expect all of you to get for my class—is CB.” She paused as some of the students sniggered.

“It stands,” she said, rolling her eyes, “for Chill, Bro.”

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut’s hand shot up. “Isn’t that sexist, Professor Shila? How about non-bros?”

And suddenly, a warm smile spread across the teacher’s face. “Indeed, it is. I’ve been campaigning to change the grade system for a while now, and until that happens, this is what we have.

“The second highest grade you can get is PG. Who knows what PG stands for? If anybody says Parental Guidance I swear I will transform you into a jamban.”¹⁹

The class remained silent, except Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, whose hand shot into the air. “Power Gedega,” she said.

“Correct! Does anybody know the highest grade?”

For a while, there was silence.

“It’s an F,” said Professor Shila.

There was a strange silence—the kind reserved for when you didn’t know if you had heard a joke or something gravely serious.

“F for Fuyoh!” explained Professor Shila.

The class scribbled into their notebooks again. The rest of the lesson was a similarly administrative one. They went through their syllabus for the year, which Harris found fascinating. It was far different from the racial harmony, pro-democracy stuff that Dada learnt in his primary school, though there were some similar elements. In the first semester, they would study the benefits of democracy and transparency, and the International Statute of Magical Secrecy; they would also learn about reversing climate change with magic, and the benefits of satay sticks versus traditional wands.

Potions class followed Social Studies and was taught by Professor #Ohsnap, a middle-aged, slick-haired man whose self-given nomenclature was his attempt to fit in with the social media generation. His real name was Severely Sullen. The class was uneventful: Professor #Ohsnap taught them how to concoct something called Tongkat Ali (he took all the successfully brewed potions at the end of class), and treated Harris with much contempt. Harris would learn later that this was because the professor held an unrequited love for Lalang, Harris' late mother, and deemed that he had to be a petty, petty man to project his disappointments, angst and anger on an innocent eleven-year-old boy.

There was a one-hour break for lunch between Potions and the final class of the day, Magical Philosophy. They spent it in the Fandi House common room, where Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut tried to teach Ron how to properly cast Wingardium Leviosial. Ron was slightly successful—he managed to lift Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut a good five centimetres off the floor.

Later they were two minutes late for Magical Philosophy, a fact that greatly distressed Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut. She apologised profusely as they entered class, only to see their fellow Fandi first years giggling at her, and no teacher present. The last to arrive, the three took their seats at the back.

About ten minutes later, a tall, thin man burst into the class muttering apologetically. He was dressed in a purple baju kurung top, a pair of sweat pants and what appeared to be a kilt. His eyes seemed unfocused, glazed over, as if he were trying to pinpoint where exactly the voices inside his head were coming from. As he walked, he accidentally dropped his briefcase, tripped over it and fell headfirst to the ground. He then shot up, dusted himself, picked up the suitcase and placed it on the table. Even the stoic Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut did mini snorts trying to control her amusement. “H-h-hello, c-class,” greeted the professor as though nothing had happened. “I a-am P-professor Pooh Quimak.”

The class giggled, and the professor appeared downright wrecked by this response.

“S-silence!” cried the teacher with all the authority of Lord Voldemort at the Large Nose Expo. “You will give m-me the repesect, I mean, r-respect that I d-d-deserve as a-a-a t-teacher.”

The class fell silent—not out of fear or respect, but because they were trying their best to hold in their laughter.

“Open your textbooks! Let’s begin t-this lesson im-im-meme-immediately!”

They opened their copies of Magical Philosophy for Bongoks...to find the inside empty, save for the occasional parchment stain. Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut had obviously opened her textbook before, for she did not exhibit the confusion that appeared on the faces of her peers.

“The first th-thing you need t-t-to know about Magical Philosophy is that nothing y-you know about magic is true.” It was strange, the way Professor Quimak spoke. He sounded nervous with his stammering tics and sedated at the same time. He waved a satay stick awkwardly, stiffly, like a statue coming to life. Perhaps it was because he was wearing really uncomfortable underwear, for he kept scratching and tapping and adjusting. “Which is why, of all books, I wanted Mutton High Digger’s classic to be our t-textbook. I want you to read the first page.”

As he waved the satay stick, a blot of ink appeared in the middle of the page, and spread, becoming letters and then words and then entire sentences. Images and borders also materialised.

The first words were:

Chapter One: The Most Basic Truth of Magic

You know, man, what if, like, magic doesn’t really exist and this is all, like, a shared delusion? Like, we’re all so in sync, delusion-wise, that we all see spells

the same way? What if this is just our way of coping with the fact that the world is a really, really horrible and mundane place? What if that's all there is to magic? Just a bunch of people blinding themselves from the ugly truths of the world just for a moment of inexplicable spectacle.

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut's hand shot into the air. "Sir, why are we studying this?"

Professor Quimak's entire body began to visibly quiver. "Why? Are you going to report me?"

"No, but I would just like to know what this has to do with our education?"

"Everything!" And then in a smaller voice, "Nothing."

"Sial lah, 'cher you're confusing us," said Ron.

"Finish the reading!" And then in the smaller voice, "Please?"

As the class murmured their growing dissent, Harris read on.

Or what if magic is all there is? All the phenomena we hold close to our hearts are mere instruments of magic—things such as love, anger, kinship, beauty—what if all of those are mere by-products of magic, and are therefore beholden to its mercurial nature? Both of these extreme interpretations of the nature of magic are, to be honest, saddening.

And then, the last line of the page: "So what is magic?"

In front of class, Professor Quimak scratched his butt again and asked by way of stammering, "So, what is magic?"

As expected, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut's hand shot up first. "Well, if we follow the ideas of thinkers who are still living, Pakcik Dollah said in his book, Magic, Siol!, that 'magic is a manifestation of the soul's spiritual energy. It is in all

living beings, but only certain DNA permutations have allowed for an individual to truly practise magic’.”

“That’s f-fifty points from Fandi House,” said Professor Quimak almost unwillingly.

“What?” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut stood and banged on her table. “Why?”

There was a prolonged “Oooh!” from a thoroughly impressed class.

“F-for quoting a book not in our syllabus,” replied Professor Quimak. There was a rumbling from inside his pants.

Harris raised his hands. “With all due respect, sir,” he began, to which the professor seemed to visibly cower. “I do not think it is worth a fifty-point deduction—sir, are you okay?”

Professor Quimak was now behind his desk, on the floor, in foetal position, having retreated there as soon as Harris spoke to him. “Class dismissed,” he whimpered.

Very slowly, tentatively, as though waiting for the professor to stand up and say, “Just kidding!”, the class stood up.

Then, the very obvious sound of a grown man sobbing emanated from behind the professor’s desk. “Dismissed!”

With more gusto, the class exited, each student glancing at the pitiful form of Professor Pooh Quimak.

“That was a very strange class,” said Ron once they were outside.

Harris agreed. “Is this a common thing in the magic world?”

“No lah, obviously. It’s not a common thing in any world.”

“I just can’t believe he took fifty points off us!” cried Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut. “That was unfair. It’s our first day!”

“Yes, it was unfair,” said Harris. “But look at him. The guy obviously has many

screws loose.”

“You know what’s more unfair?” she continued. “We did not learn anything at all from this lesson. We just literally wasted an entire period.”

“Are you kidding? That means we have an hour to do whatever we want before dinner!” said Ron. “Come on, we have free time for the first time since school started. What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? At the count of three, let’s all answer at the same time. One—”

“Why must we say it at the same time?” asked Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, exasperated. “This is so stupid.”

“Two! Three!”

“Library,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut quickly.

“Arcade,” said Ron.

“The seventh room on the seventh floor of the northeastern spire,” said Harris.

The other two turned to Harris, slack-jaw in shock. “It’s forbidden!” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“But why is it forbidden? Why would they have anything forbidden in a school filled with curious kids? Why would they even tell us about it? They could have just locked the room and said nothing. I think Pakcik Dollah wants us to find out what’s inside the room. I think he made that announcement as a test. It’s all a test. We are supposed to get into that room.”

“Are you done with your conspiracy theories?” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut asked impatiently. “And Ron, there’s no arcade here! It’s a school, not Junction 8.”

“What’s Junction 8?” asked the boy who had spent his entire life within the secret magical community.

“It’s a mall,” replied Harris.

“Let’s go to the library. I think we should practise our levitating spells,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said with concrete finality. Harris opened his mouth to protest,

but the blazing look from his friend killed any thoughts of visiting the seventh room on the seventh floor...for the time being.

14 Malay: to eat. “Mak”, which means “mother”, is not the base word for makan. The extrapolation for this fact is this: Don’t expect your mum to cook for you all the time! Cook for her from time to time, come on!

15 Street Malay: “You wanna dance? Let’s dance!” This is often used to kickstart gang brawls in parking lots, or to mistakenly kickstart dance-offs, which is less criminal and a much better way of finding Singapore’s answer to Channing Tatum.

16 Some would argue that this effectively makes it a pair of spectacles, but no, they’re two monocles. Professor Dickon Flickdick, who preferred long, slow train rides and witnessing the ponderous passage of time, did not have the temperament for spectacles.

17 This highlights the importance of a well-placed en dash. The twins are American–Indian, which is to say that their father is American and their mother Indian. Had they been American Indian, they’d have names like Sitting Bull or Knitting Velociraptor.

18 Malay: go back to your village, a phrase whose existence in the modern, concrete-jungle, village-less setting of Singapore suggests an insinuation of uncouth backwardness.

19 A jamban is not to be confused with a jam ban. One is the Malay word for a toilet bowl. The other is a means of regulating bread spreads.



Chapter 9 3/4: The Stoned Manifesto

The Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Bapak Kau Punya Moyang Library was named for the ghost-librarian 20 that haunted its numerous shelves. The ghost's name, if you can't already tell, is Bapak Kau Punya Moyang. 21 Bapak Kau had passed some fifty years back, but found himself grasping at the fraying threads of his mortal coil. When a light at the end of a tunnel presented itself to him upon his death, he refused it, stuck out a middle finger to Death and spirited himself to the only place in life he felt at home: his alma mater. Pakcik Dollah offered Bapak Kau the position of librarian upon seeing his former student back as a ghost.

Bapak Kau was a translucent ghost, perpetually dressed in white robes. He spoke in drawn-out moans, which tended to be the case when one lacked the biological mechanisms needed for speaking, such as vocal chords and a physical mouth. And currently, he said/moaned, "Can I help you children?"

"We would like to practise our spelling," said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

"Practise rooms are behind the Philosophy section," moaned Bapak Kau, pointing a translucent finger to the far end of the library.

"Thank you...uhhh..." Harris was not sure of the ghost's name.

"Bapak Kau."

"What is this, Empire Strikes Back?" cried Harris. "No you're not!"

The three headed off in the direction of the practise rooms. Harris brought up the rear, and was thus the first to feel thoroughly discomforted by the fact that Bapak Kau Punya Moyang was trailing them, floating along behind Harris as the "pariah constant".

"Uh, guys," Harris whispered. "He's following us."

"Who?" asked Ron.

“Bapak Kau.”

“No lah! He’s at work today. My mum told me so. Said he almost missed his Magic MRT because he insisted on making his toast kosong-style...you know, with a poster.”

“Toaster, Ron,” corrected Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“Coaster.”

“Toaster.”

“Boaster.”

“Toaster!”

“Holster.”

“Are you even listening to me? Toaster! With a T!”

“Guys!” Harris said, louder this time.

The other two stopped and turned to face Harris, who pointed at the ghost trailing after them.

“Can we help you?” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut asked the ghost politely.

“Not really,” the ghost moaned awfully. “I am, after all, dead. But I believe that I can help you.”

With his last word, the ghost’s eyes—or at least, the spectral representation of his eyes—fixated on Harris’.

“You’re in grave danger in this school, son of Jamal bin Potter.”

“Grave danger? Why?”

“There’s a prawn behind the rock.”

“What is that prawn thinking siak?” Ron said. “Getting out of the water, hiding behind a rock. That’s not proper prawn behaviour. Proper prawn behaviour is

getting slathered in butter and then getting barbecued over an open charcoal fire
—”

“No, Ron!” whispered Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut. “Ada udang sebalik batu. It’s a proverb, you doofus! It means someone who doesn’t appear to be who he is. Someone seems harmless, but is in fact a danger to Harris.”

“But, who?” Harris turned to ask Bapak Kau, but the ghost, for the lack of a better word, had ghosted on them. “Bapak Kau?”

“Mr Kau?”

“His surname is Punya Moyang, Ron!” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut admonished her friend.

“Mr Punya Moyang?” Ron called.

But the ghost hadn’t gone far for he was drifting back to them moments later.
“Can I help you?”

“Who is posing a threat to Harris?” he asked, exchanging concerned looks with his new friend.

“I do not know who, but I do know a black cloud follows you, Harris bin Potter.”

Ron looked above his friend, up at the library’s ceiling. “No there isn’t.”

But the ghost hadn’t heard him. Instead, Bapak Kau Punya Moyang extracted a book from the depths of his ectoplasm, and passed it to them. “Hopefully this will shed some light on the dangers that are coming your way.”

“The Stoned Manifesto.” Harris read the title and flipped through the first few pages. “It’s mostly just very short poems.”

“Like a Bang Beav book?” asked Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

Ron was frowning. “Who’s Bang Beav?”

“She’s a famous, uh, I want to say...poet. Who’s it by?”

Harris read the colophon. “Lord Oldermat.”

The other two gasped.

“There are terrible truths in that book,” said Bapak Kau Punya Moyang from behind them. He sounded sad, tired. As a ghost, he could pass through most corporeal objects, but the weight of the world still seemed like a palpable burden upon his shoulders.

“Guys,” Ron said, “Lord Oldermat is dead. Like disco. Like ‘fo shizzle’. Like Lindsay Lohan’s acting career.” He pointed at Harris. “Harris made sure of it.”

“But nobody ever found his corpse,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut pointed out.

Harris looked at the colophon again. “Guys, this was published five years ago.”

“How come nobody has ever heard of it?”

“Because only one copy has ever made it to the public,” said Bapak Kau, placing a ghostly finger on the book. His finger passed through the cover and out the underside, through Harris’ palm. “This one.”

“Then how did it get here?” asked the boy.

“It appeared on my desk one day,” said the ghost. “There was no letter, no document, no parrot. It just appeared.”

“Maybe someone teleported it there,” said Ron.

“You cannot. Hog-Tak-Halal-What has enchantments that protect it from foreign materials being teleported into the school,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

Harris saw his own dreadful realisation reflected in his friends’ faces. “That means it’s somebody inside the school. It could be one of the students. It could even be one of the teachers.”

“Or,” said Ron, “hear me out. The book was at Oldermat’s hideout in Yishun—it has to be Yishun, come on, so many strange things have happened there—but then an eagle, thinking he could shred it for nest parts, picked it up. The eagle flew back to its nest at the top of a flat in Woodlands, but a gust from Malaysia blows the book out of its claws, and it lands on top of a plate of prata that some random bro was eating. The random bro was so shocked that he flips the table,

and the book flies onto the boot of a taxi that was just passing by. But the taxi gets into an accident with a Lamborghini driven by a Malay dude and the book flies from the extreme impact through a previously undiscovered tear in the fabric of space and time produced by the logical paradox of a Malay man owning and driving a Lamborghini. That tear in the fabric of space-time has an exit point, right here in the library.” Ron looked at his companions. Only the ghost was giving his words due consideration.

“I highly doubt that’s what happened, Ron,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, rolling her eyes so much she could almost see into the back of her head.

“Guys,” said Harris, calling his friends’ attention back to the tome at hand.

“Let’s see what’s in the book. There’s a reason why Bapak Kau Punya Moyang wanted us to see this.” His friends gathered around him, and Harris opened the leather-bound book.

The Stoned Manifesto

By Lord Oldermat

Printed on non-recycled paper.

Who cares about trees anyway?

What are trees but glorified bird toilets? Am I right?

These Brown Men

Gaze upon

these

wastes

of white

space.

Here's Your Anak Kambing

Di mana dia, they asked, di mana dia

Di mana dia anak kambing saya?

And in that ignorance there was the kind of magic

That ignites three-hour smoke breaks

In a six-hour work day

(They came in two hours late anyway)

That toasted crime so they wide-spread

Their red-light sambal upon it

That propelled them as they swam under

The current of the national average

Limbo under the bar of the national average

Misspelled the national average

Stole from the national average

Filled up the prisons of the national average.

So there's your anak kambing, chan mali chan

Oi, oi, ketipung your payung for the final time.

Who Deserves Magic?

I often
think about
who deserves magic.

I know I
am deserving.

For look upon
my poetry,
it

is truly magical.

You know why?

Because I break
up sentences
like
this.

An Ode to My Cab Driver

Shut up, talkative fool.

Nobody wants to know

about

how your breakfast curry puff was bad

your daughter getting married

your wife baking cookies

your favourite Malay movie

your preference for Ramli Sarip over M. Nasir

(I have no idea who those people are)

your “Did you watch the Arsenal game last night?”

your “The PAP doesn’t care about the uneducated”.

Because they are the ramblings of a small Malay man

and the shortcomings of the culture

manifest in a sad, sad cab driver.

Masterplan

Roses are red,
Dead violets are greying
Music hath charms to take
Magic off the undeserving.

“I can’t read any more of this. This is crappy poetry,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, slamming the book shut. “And racist.”

Harris looked at the book in his hand. Through all the security of the school, this abhorrent object had somehow made its way into the library. He flipped the pages. There were more poems, one racist, hateful tirade after another. “Can I keep this?” he asked the phantom librarian.

“Are you planning to lend it and return it within fourteen days?”

Harris realised he might need the book for longer. This was vital evidence that supporters of Lord Oldermat—or, Fandi Ahmad forbid, the dark lord himself—were active within the school compound. “No?”

“Then you are taking it out of here over my dead body!” cried the ghost.

Harris looked at Bapak Kau Punya Moyang and, by virtue of the ghost’s translucent visage, through him. “Okay,” said the boy, and left the library with his friends, and the book.

20 Where most libraries are named after their foremost patrons, the board of directors at Hog-Tak-Halal-What decided that the most important name in their

library should be the one who knew where all the books were.

21 To be clear, the ghost's first name is Bapak Kau ("your father"), while his surname is Punya Moyang. Those who have been in the castle long enough know that this might be the ghost's adopted afterlife name. Some ghosts may forget their name while they were alive, having no human method of information storage (like a brain), so nomenclatures for them become more sentimental and spiritual.



Chapter 10: CCA Day

Harris and Ron joined Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut at the Great Hall for breakfast on their first Saturday. Most of the students were already there, and a buzz of excitement filled the air.

“Today we get to choose our CCAs!” Ron was singing, as he did a small, joyful shuffling jig.

CCAs, or Co-Curricular Activities, a mainstay in the Singaporean education system, encouraged students to take up a sport or join a society, for a more rounded, holistic school life. Hog-Tak-Halal-What’s CCAs, however, included a whole host of clubs, groups and sports that catered to the magical community and their interests, such as the Duelling Club, which taught students how to duel in safe environments, and the Illuminutty, which secretly grew nuts in the Hog-Tak-Halal-What greenhouse.

Ron was singing his little chant of joy all through breakfast, from the queue for cereal all the way to the long table where all of Fandi House were eating.

“I hope I get to join the void deck football team! Void deck football is my life,” he enthused. “It’s my raisin day-three, siol.”

“Raisin day-three?”

“You know, a raisin day-three. That’s how you know a raisin is a raisin and not an insect. You wait for three days. If the raisin doesn’t move, then it’s a raisin. It’s how you know that something is what you are meant to do, or meant to be.”

“Do you mean *raison d’être*?” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut pointedly.

“How do you spell that?” asked Ron. His friend obliged him. “Isn’t that raisin day-three?”

“No, it is not,” she said flatly.

“Let’s disagree to agree.”

Before Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut could interject and point out the absurdity of what he just said, Ron asked, “How about you, Harris? What CCA do you want to join?”

Harris thought of the one time he had played void deck football with Dada, how he had dribbled circles around Dada and his friends—a rather impressive feat, considering not all of Dada’s friends shared his affinity for calories.

“Yeah, okay, maybe I’ll apply for void deck football with you,” Harris said to Ron. “How about you, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut?”

“I’m thinking of becoming a student librarian.” The girl did a small pirouette, her arms outstretched to the endless imaginary shelves of imaginary books before her. “Each book is a universe. As a student librarian, I’m essentially custodian to multiverses. Is that not the ultimate CCA?”

“Whatever, nerd,” said Ron. “You can’t win the House Cup based on number of books read.”

But because it was a wonderful Saturday morning, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut simply ignored him and continued eating her cereal happily.

Harris did so as well, until his ears perked up at the words “forbidden room” in a conversation next to them.

“They say in the forbidden room—you know, seventh room, seventh floor, yada yada—there’s a mirror that shows you what your heart truly desires,” said a student.

“Wow, what do you think you’ll see in it?” asked the other.

“A final season of Game of Thrones that’s actually good. You?”

“Five million followers on my Instagram account,” came a reply full of conviction.

Harris thought about this. What would he see in a mirror that shows his true desires? A larger, more spacious bedroom with an actual bed, probably. Or perhaps a smooth forehead with no S-shaped scar.

Then he knew the answer—it would be to see his parents alive, beaming down proudly at him.

He tried to tell himself that it was pointless attaching so much emotional energy into an idea that was essentially breakfast table gossip. Harris cleared his mind and resumed his conversation with his friends, but an idea like that never truly goes away.

After breakfast, Harris, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut stepped out into the main courtyard, into the glorious sunlight. The courtyard was filled with first-year students crowding around various CCA booths, each one declaring itself with large fonts.

Harris read the banners one by one: “Cooking Club, Duelling Club, Sorting Songkok Maintenance Club, Disobedient Girlfriends Club.”

The voice of Professor Shila could be heard over the public announcement speakers. “...and in the multipurpose hall, the Etymology Club will perform a dramatic re-enactment of the first time a pile of faeces got flung into a fan entitled How Shit Hit the Fan: An Origin Story. Enjoy, students, and remember: pick your CCAs wisely!”

Just at the courtyard’s exit, a fourth-year student was giving out a CCA Day Guide Book. It detailed all the CCAs available in Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, listing the teachers-in-charge, team captains, group leaders, past achievements and the like.

The first booth to greet Harris, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut had a large sign with “FOOD FIGHT CLUB” scrawled in what looked to be pasta sauce.

“There’s a Food Fight Club?” asked Harris.

“Some American exchange students in Year 4 started it last year,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said, reading off the CCA guide book.

Manning (or, in this case, womanning) the booth was a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl named Stacey as well as a handsome brunette, a fifth-year named Tyler.

While Stacey was speaking to the Petal twins iPadma and iPodma, Tyler set aside a juicy, decadent steakhouse burger when he saw the three walking his

way.

Tyler rose and spoke warmly, “Welcome to Food Fight Club! Think fast!” He picked up his burger, and threw it at Harris.

With unerring skill, Harris caught it and passed it to Ron, who happily gobbled it up.

“Good catch,” Tyler said almost sadly. But he quickly gathered himself and continued, “Before I begin, you need to know the rules of Food Fight Club. The first rule of Food Fight Club is: you do not talk about Food Fight Club.”

“Don’t bedek,” Ron said in between mouthfuls of burger. “You’re talking about it now.”

“The second rule of Food Fight Club is,” Tyler said over Ron, “you do not talk about Food Fight Club.”

“That’s the same as the first rule, just with different emphasis,” Harris pointed out impatiently. “What do you guys do?”

“The third rule of Food Fight Club—”

“God damn it, man, will you just tell us what it is you do?” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“What we do? My friend, Food Fight Club takes in any student, and we take away who they are. We take away preconceived notions of self and identity, we strip them of their ego and super-ego. We see them without their trust fund, their cliques, their cronies, their bitches or their ringleaders. We remove their grades, their successes and their failures. We put them, stripped bare, in a series of near-life experiences.”

“Bro,” Ron said in the tone of an older man patiently explaining to a child that one and one makes two, “the phrase is near-death experience lah.”

“No, brother,” Tyler said, his eyes almost ablaze, “I mean near-life experiences. Experiences, in which, for once in their short lives, they feel close-to-truly alive.”

Harris said, “You haven’t answered my question.”

“What we do is as much sport as it is social commentary. As much art as it is a gratuitous attempt to get ladies covered in sauce.” He glanced at Stacey and the Petal twins, and licked his lips involuntarily. “We take society’s consumables, we throw it at other people in a grand statement that capitalism is a joke flung around. Most of the times, it misses, but sometimes, sometimes, it hits us right in the face.”

“Really? Because it sounds like what you guys do is start food fights,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said flatly.

“And waste perfectly good food,” Ron said. “Sial lah, do you know how many people in Africa are starving right now?”

“Five? I don’t know. Do you?”

“Well...” Ron attempted to recall the number of Africans he knew. “No,” he said finally.

But Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was livid. “I don’t know what they teach you back in your American equivalent of a primary school, but here in Singapore, we love our food, so we eat it. Some of us Instagram our food before we eat it, sure, but at least we eat it after—not throw precious food at each other.”

“You’re mistaken,” said Tyler, addressing the boys and closing his eyes to give his words extra gravitas. “Look at me. I look like you want to look, I eat like you want to eat. I am smart, I am capable, I am free in all the ways that you are not, and most importantly I look like Brad. Is it because I’m a Caucasian person in Singapore? Hell no. Don’t believe what the taxi drivers tell you. It’s simply because every now and then, I throw food at my fellow students, and they throw food back at me.” Tyler looked again to find that the three were already walking away.

A familiar voice called out to Harris as they went further down the school courtyard.

Harris turned, and saw a giant of a man lumbering towards them.

“Hamid!” he called with a smile. He then introduced his friends to the school’s

janitor.

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut quickly withdrew her hand after shaking Hamid's, possibly afraid that he would crush it.

Ron mouthed to his friends, "What is up with his accent?"

Neither of them entertained the question.

"How yeh doin' m'boy?" Hamid asked Harris.

"I'm fine, thank you," Harris replied.

Hamid placed a large hand on Harris' head and ruffled the boy's hair. "Have you chosen a CCA?"

"Not yet. We've only seen the Food Fight Club. Too 'Murica for us."

"Yeh know, back in the day, your Pawpaw played void deck football fer Fandi house. He was one of the best we evah had."

For some reason, this information brought a smile to Harris' face. "How about my mother?"

"Oh, she was in the Limerick Club."

Harris said, "I never knew we had that."

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said, "Was it just a passing fad?"

"No, it wasn't. Members of more than a dozen."

Ron said wistfully, "Ah, the days before Snapchat."

"Anyway," said Hamid, "I gots to run. There be things that need cleanin'!"

This saddened Harris somewhat. He rather liked the friendly giant.

"Hey, 'arris," the janitor said as he walked away. "I think you should try out for the void deck football team. You'll be great at it."

The next booth was for some sport called quidditch. In an excited, high-pitched voice, a short, bespectacled girl explained the game to them, and the three friends wondered how and why the school had approved it as a CCA, let alone allowed it to come into existence.

“So players ride their broomsticks—”

“Broomsticks? That’s unhygienic! People sweep the floor with those things!” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said.

“The broomsticks help them fly—”

“That’s dangerous!” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut had begun gesticulating with indignation at this point. “And still unhygienic.”

“There are three balls—”

“That’s confusing!” said Ron.

“One of them is called the quaffle. Players called chasers attempt to throw them into one of three hoops.”

“Are there different points for different hoops?” Harris asked.

“No. You score ten points for your team as long as you put the quaffle through any one of your opponent’s hoops. But do you know that the quaffles are magically enchanted to fall very slowly through the air so players don’t have to keep diving to retrieve them?”

“That is really useless information,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said.

“I wish I had some magically enchanted waffles,” Ron said absently.

“The second ball is called the bludger. It’s a heavy ball that’s enchanted to fly around and knock players off their brooms.”

“Do you not hear yourself?” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was livid at the game’s blatant disregard for structure, cohesion and safety. “What sport does that?”

The girl soldiered on, and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut grudgingly gave her respect for

persevering. “Each team has two beaters, armed with bats, to knock the bludger towards the opposing chasers so they’d drop the quaffle.”

But here, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut had to pipe up. “Safety hazard, right there. You could snap someone’s neck. People could get paralyzed!” She was almost hyperventilating at the game’s callous attitude towards regulation and safety and, to a certain extent, life.

Ron said, “You could be the beater. Sial lah, that’s some serious work. You’ll be like those people in the zoo whose job is to punish monkeys when they misbehave...by spanking them.”

“But!” the girl from the quidditch team continued, her enthusiasm unperturbed. “Then there’s the seeker.” She said “seeker” as if it were divine.

“And what’s a seeker?” asked Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut apprehensively.

“Each team has a single chaser, and his or her job is to find the Golden Snitch, a winged ball that flutters about haphazardly across the pitch. Catching the snitch is worth 150 points. So the seeker makes or breaks the game.”

“Actually, I think the chaser makes the game,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut posited.

“And the beater breaks it,” Ron finished.

“But it is a fun game, isn’t it?” said the girl.

“It is,” replied Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, “if you find having your bones broken enjoyable.”

“Come on, I’m sure we can find something about the game you’ll like.”

“I’m a huge fan of Gintonic Wizzly,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said. “She’s a chaser in England, and one of the greatest feminist icons in sport. But that’s about it.”

“Gintonic Wizzly?” an older boy nearby said. “Please! She’s like beer. Fantastic chaser, but too much of her gives you a headache.”

“You know, this quidditch sounds more like a plot device than an actual sport,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said indignantly. “I’m not joining.”

“Yeah, neither am I,” said Ron.

They turned to Harris. He was already gone, having left at the mention of Gintonic Wizzly. Currently, he was looking at a piece of parchment magically floating above them. It shimmered in the sunlight, like a vampire from a terrible novel.

It read, “Void deck football trials for Fandi House: 10.30am at the void deck football court.”

“That’s in ten minutes!” cried Harris. He immediately turned and sprinted the full length of the courtyard towards the void deck football pitch.

Ron sprinted after him, while Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was rooted indignantly to the spot. Her thoughts roamed to the nature of the male attention span, how it might apply to women, and realised that she had always been free to do whatever she wanted. She continued visiting booths.

Harris and Ron, in the meantime, reached their destination with four minutes to spare. The pitch recreated concrete environs of a void deck. Dusty white pillars lined the boundaries of the playing area. There were two standard street soccer goalposts at either end, and a side gate for players to enter and exit. The ceiling was a glass panel, which allowed the audience of the amphitheatre-style arena to watch from their elevated seats.

Harris and Ron saw a group of six—including a couple of other first years—gathered in front of two students in Fandi red jerseys.

One of the footballers spoke up. He had spiky hair and an athletic disposition and spectacles that suggested “Math nerd”. It was a confusing albeit charming look. “Good morning, triallists! I’m Aizat, captain of the Fandi void deck football team. I’m in my fourth year at Hog-Tak-Halal-What.”

“And I’m vice-captain Oliver Newton John-Wood,” said the vice-captain with a casual smile. “I’m a third year here, and I play goalie.”

Aizat continued, “I thank you all for attending the trials. We have a proud tradition here at Fandi House. We’re champions for seven years running...back in the eighties.”

“How about now?” asked Harris.

A dark look passed over Aizat’s visage. “Remember what the Sorting Songkok sang?”

“I remember it sang lah,” Ron said. “The exact words—not so much.”

The captain sang the words from memory. “When it came to void deck soccer, they ruled with unerring skill—past tense. It’s been more than thirty years since we won the cup.”

“So who’s champion house now?” asked Ron.

“Trump,” said Aizat in the same manner Captain America might say “Communism” or a tree might say “deforestation”. He left the word to hang in the air, allowing it to sink in with the new Fandi freshmen. “But we hope to change that this year.”

One of the third-year hopefuls cried an enthusiastic, “Hear! Hear!”

“Eh, we’re not deaf deaf. Chill out, bro,” Ron replied.

Aizat continued, “In Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, void deck football is a five-a-side game—one goalkeeper, four outfield players—playing for two halves of thirty minutes each. We tend to play a 2-1-1 system: two defenders, one midfielder to link defence and attack, and one attacker. I’m usually the sole midfielder, but occasionally, I will play as a ball-playing defender”—he paused as Ron sniggered—“if the situation demands it. But hey, if any of you can prove that you’re better, I’ll be more than happy to give up my place.”

Ron raised a hand. “Where are the other Fandi players?”

Aizat and Oliver Newton John-Wood exchanged looks.

“They have all...left the school.”

“As in, they graduated?”

“A couple of them,” said Oliver Newton John-Wood. He looked at his captain

uncertainly.

“The rest...lost their magic. One day they were casting spells with the rest of us in Spelling class, and the next, they were poking their satay sticks around... magiclessly. It was strange,” said Aizat, his otherwise commanding voice wavering momentarily. “But no matter. Today, we’re looking to reform the team. I plan to win the championship.”

The boy who previously cried, “Hear! Hear!” opened his mouth again, but Ron shut him up with a well-timed glare.

Aizat continued, “Now, I need you to split into two groups of five. I’ll be in one while Oliver will be in the other. We won’t play a full game today—I want to see how you respond to high-pressure situations. So, first to two goals wins!”

Independently, the group of ten divided into two—Harris and Ron teamed up with two second-year triallists, a boy named Jamal Tinkledoop and a girl named Far Hana.²² Oliver Newton John-Wood joined Harris, Ron, Jamal and Far Hana, while Aizat joined the others.

The other team of triallists kicked off. They started bright, testing Oliver Newton John-Wood repeatedly. Ron immediately gravitated towards an attacking position, while Harris commandeered the middle, linking defender Jamal Tinkledoop to Ron.

Two minutes had passed since kickoff when one of Aizat’s trademark thunderbolts hit Jamal Tinkledoop right in his nether regions. While the curly-haired Eurasian boy crumpled to the floor in pain, Harris quickly picked up the loose ball. He dribbled the ball slightly more than a metre up the pitch, before passing it to Ron. The tall redhead deftly flicked the oncoming ball over a defender’s head, before slotting it coolly past the goalkeeper. One-nil to the triallists.

At the restart, the Fandi players upped the ante, making more frenzied advances towards the triallists’ goal. They tried tricks, attempting fancy dribbles and showboating around the triallists.

Jamal Tinkledoop was so frustrated he pulled down Aizat’s shorts when the Fandi captain managed to dribble past him for an embarrassing seventh time.

It was, of course, a foul. In the ensuing free kick, Aizat shot over the bar by mere millimetres.

A few minutes on, Aizat received the ball at the right side of the pitch. He then laid the ball to Harris on his left, who sent in a magnificently accurate bullet of a pass into the path of Ron, who deftly slid the ball past the hapless goalkeeper.

Two–nil to Harris’ triallists, and the game was over.

Aizat approached the second-years first after the game, shaking their hands and thanking them for participating. To Harris and Ron, he asked, “Would you like to be part of the Fandi void deck football team?”

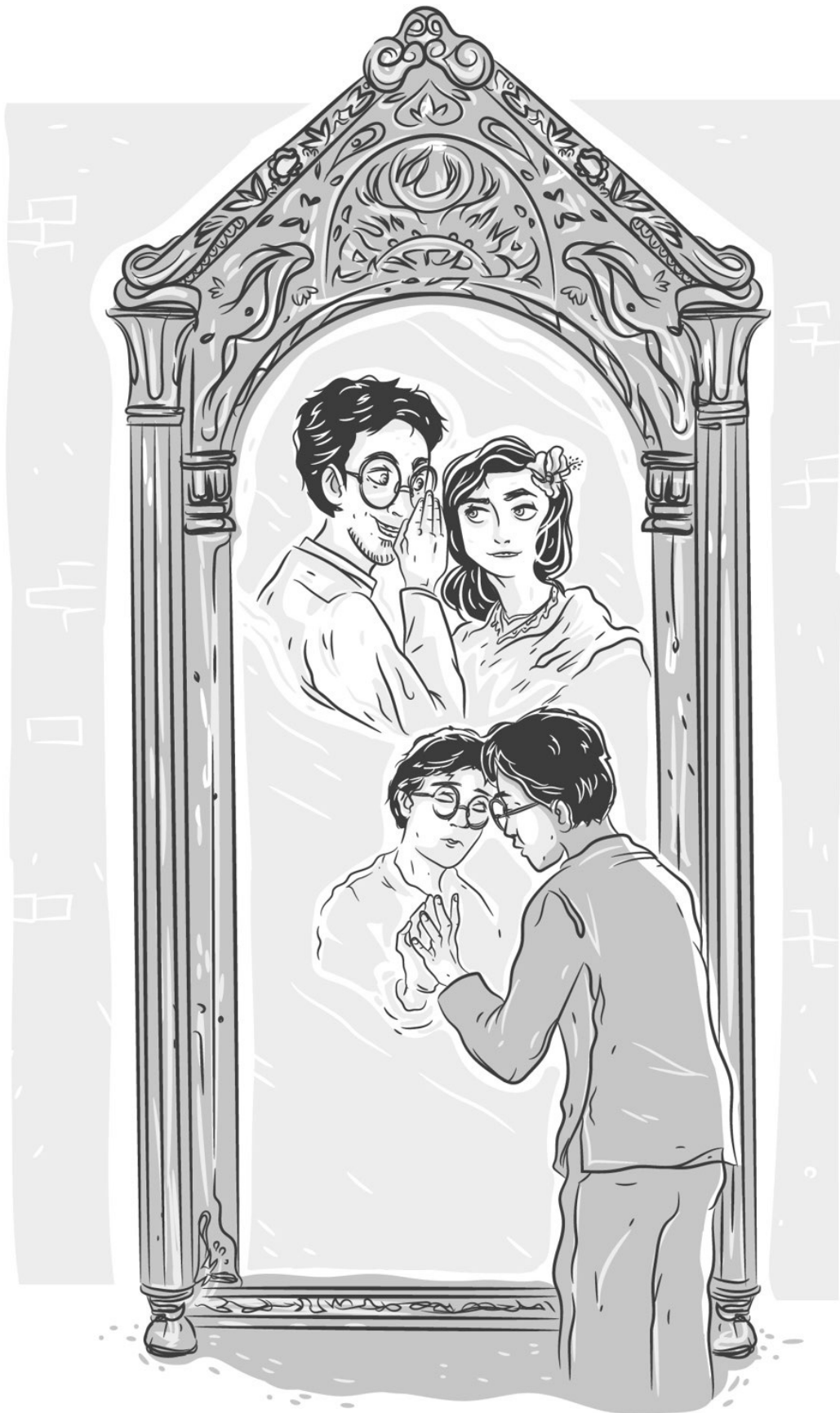
Ron replied, “You might as well ask a Malay man if he wants satay.”

Slightly confused, Aizat asked, “Is that a yes?”

Ron pressed on, “Well, the Malay man could be diabetic. Or maybe he just wants to start eating clean. Salads and quinoa and the like. Maybe—”

“Yes!” Harris interjected, shutting his friend up. “Yes, we would be honoured to join the Fandi void deck football team!”

22 Co-ed sports are encouraged, largely due to the progressive nature of the magical community’s most prominent sport, quidditch. Despite its questionable regulations, the game was the first international game that allowed both genders to participate.



Chapter 11: The Mirror of Tatnap

There are several things that many Malay people do not know. That is not to say that Malay people are predisposed to not know things—that would be a horribly racist statement to make, even if the author himself is Malay. One can be sure that other cultures have varying degrees of ignorance as well. The Hutu tribes of Central Africa, for example, are not well versed in igloo construction, and the art of putting together a void deck wedding, probably.

What many Malay people do not know is that the word referring to fasting, “puasa”, can trace its etymology to the classical Sanskrit word “upavasa”, which means an abstinence from worldly and corporeal pleasures.

Harris did not know that either. He also didn’t know why his Headmaster had forbidden the students from entering the seventh room of the seventh floor corridor of the northeastern spire. Why couldn’t Pakcik Dollah simply lock the door? Why the seventh room of the seventh floor? What was inside that needed to be shrouded in so much secrecy? Harris had obsessed over this for weeks.

The day most of those questions were answered came in early March, when it was announced that Potions class would be relocated to the fifth floor of the northeastern spire due to a “Wilhelm malfunction” (“A Screaming Shambles! A Blaring Bedlam! A Yelling Yowza!” one of the prefects described it).

That day, as their Potions professor droned on about concocting intricacies of love potions numbers one through nine, Harris could not help but look out the windows. He only needed to go two floors up to reach...

Harris was jolted out of his reverie when there was sudden movement next to him. IPodma had turned back to face iPadma and said in a sweet voice, “My beloved sister, child of the stars, would you like to go to the toilet with me?”

“Yes, my sister, blossom of paradise,” iPadma said just as sweetly. She raised a hand and asked the professor, “May we, O educator, O blessed pedagogue, utilise the lavatory facilities?”

Professor #Ohsnap rolled his eyes in a perfect circle and shooed them out of class.

It gave Harris an idea. “Ron,” he said sweetly, turning to Ron. “Would you like to go to the toilet with me?”

Ron looked like a deer caught in the headlights of a rainbow-coloured steamroller. “Eh, lu gila ke apa?23 Harris, it doesn’t work the same way with us, okay? We are not that kind of friends.”

Harris leaned closer to Ron and said in an urgent whisper. “I don’t want to go with you to the toilet!”

“Now you’re just being confusing, bro.”

“I want to check out that room Pakcik Dollah forbade us to enter.”

“Oh yah, now I want to follow you even more,” Ron said, with the kind of sarcasm that would sound incredible if said in Alan Rickman’s voice.

“Come on lah, Ron.” Harris raised a hand. When Professor #Ohsnap saw it, he rolled his eyes so dramatically they almost oscillated.

“Yes, Harris?”

“Professor Ohsnap—”

“Hashtag Ohsnap.”

“O educator, O blessed pedag-peda-pe-p-paedophile—”

“Excuse me?”

Ron butted in, “Sir, can Harris and I go to the toilet?”

“Of course you may, Ron.”

The whole class laughed. Someone cried, “Oh snap!”

“That’s HASHTAG Ohsnap. Twenty points from Fandi for the utter disrespect for my nomenclature.”

Once outside the classroom, Harris and Ron let go of each other's hands and sped up two flights of stairs to the seventh floor.

"Harris, are we really doing this?"

"Yes, Ron!" said Harris. "I need to know what's in that room."

"Didn't you hear Pakcik Dollah? It's dangerous."

"Have you seen Pakcik Dollah? I don't think Pakcik Dollah hears Pakcik Dollah."

They reached the imposing wooden door of the seventh room of the seventh floor of the northeastern tower. Harris tried the knob, but it didn't budge.

"What are you guys doing here?" said a voice, seething like a soup of lava. The boys turned to see Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut stomping towards them. "When the two of you said you were going to the toilet together, I knew something was up. I knew where you two jambans²⁴ were going! Did you hear what Pakcik Dollah said?"

"Did Pakcik Dollah hear what Pakcik Dollah said?" Ron asked, smirking briefly at Harris, who smirked back.

"We have to go back to class!"

"Come on, Her-Aku-Pukya-Lutut, don't you want to know what they're hiding in here?"

"No!"

Harris put a hand on her shoulder and looked deep into her eyes. "Look, you're here with us. The faster you help me unlock this door, the faster we can head back to class. The faster we can learn things and get better grades."

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was livid, initially, that Harris even suggested she partake in their foolishness. Then her face softened, she withdrew her satay stick. "We're doing this quickly," she said with a tired sigh. "In and then out!"

"You got it," Harris said.

Ron smiled. “In then out!”

The bushy-haired girl turned towards the door and fixed her eyes on the keyhole. Pointing her satay stick, she made a twisting motion and chanted, “Alo-Open-Up-Lah!”

There was a click. Harris tried the doorknob, and it rotated fully. The door gave way without so much of a creak, and Harris stepped in. The room was largely empty. All he saw was a full-length standing mirror in the middle of the room, and a vast oak closet at the back.

Harris approached the mirror, appreciating its ornate, dark mahogany frame. The wood carvings appeared to be a mix of cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics. Etched in Comic Sans at the top of the frame were the words:

The Mirror of Tatnap

“What the hell is Tatnap?” Harris asked his friends. He couldn’t help thinking that if you spell “tatnap” backwards, you’d get “pan tat”—and nobody wants a tattoo of a pan. It tended to kill street cred.

There was no reply. Harris turned to look at Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut. His friends were staring into the reflective surface of the mirror.

“That’s disgusting!” cried Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, pointing at the mirror.

“What do you see?” Harris asked.

“I see Angelina Jolie showing me her butt,” Ron replied.

“I don’t want to say,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, more to the floor than to her friends.

Harris looked into the mirror. Initially, it was just his reflection staring back at him. Then an image materialised behind his reflection. It was a Malay man with wild hair similar to his. Soon, he was joined by a Malay woman, who had hair

that flowed like an obsidian river. He had seen these people before, in a photograph Hamid had showed him in Lorong Diagon. A wave of melancholy washed over him as he wished he could reach out into the mirror and touch them. He wished he could fall...into the looking glass, as it were. The people in the mirror then did a peculiar thing. They bent over in unison and started smacking their buttocks at Harris.

“What kind of weird-ass—”

Harris stopped short as the unmistakable sound of footsteps reached his ears. His two friends heard it too, and they exchanged stricken looks. He pointed towards the large closet, and Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut climbed inside quickly. Realising there was no space for him, Harris closed the closet, took a deep breath and turned to face the door.

The knob shuddered and turned, and the door opened.

In walked a wizened old wizard with a long white beard. He was wearing purple pyjama robes and fuchsia cowboy boots. He was also whistling the theme to the television show *Lost*. It was a very short whistle.

Seeing Harris, Pakcik Dollah smiled. “Ah, Harris!” he said jovially. “Didn’t I specifically say that nobody is supposed to be here?” The joviality never left his voice. He might as well have said, “Thank you for getting me that Christmas sweater in exactly the colour I wanted.”

“I’m sorry I went against your orders, sir,” Harris said to the floor.

“Ah, no matter,” said Pakcik Dollah lightly. “I see you’ve discovered the Mirror of Tatnap.”

“Tat nap, sir?” asked Harris.

“It’s what you give for a Titnap. You know, ‘a Titnap for Tatnap’.”

“...and what’s a Tit nap?”

“It’s what all boys desire but are too busy playing *World of Warcraft* to get.”

“Sorry?”

“It is inconsequential, Harris,” said Pakcik Dollah. The Headmaster looked in the direction of the closet. “You can come out now, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut,” he said.

Slowly, tentatively, Harris’ two friends came out of the closet, ready to defend their presence with notions such as “just because God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve doesn’t mean Steve should be treated like a pariah” or “they were born this way”.

But they understood the severity of the situation. They were not caught by just any teacher—they were caught by the Headmaster, the very person who decreed that they were forbidden to be in this room.

Instead of the severe admonishment (or worse—expulsion) that they expected, the wizard said, “Now, I will let the three of you off this one time. But I request that you do not come here again, for the most brilliant minds have wasted away staring and grasping for the truths they believe lie in the Mirror of Tatnap—and a mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

The three continued staring at their Headmaster, the relief from escaping trouble—and punishment—still sinking in.

Then, with all the propriety of a Pokémon evolving at a creationist convention, Ron’s stomach growled.

“And a waist is a terrible thing to mind!” Pakcik Dollah said with a chuckle. “Now get back to class, you three! I think the canteen break after Professor Shila’s class will be a welcome recess.”

Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut scuttled off, but Harris remained. “Sir?”

“Yes, Harris?”

“I need to tell you about something we found in the library.”

“I do not know how that copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* got there,” said the Headmaster unconvincingly.

“No,” Harris pressed on, “it’s not about that. We found a book by Lord Oldermat in the library. Something called *The Stoned Manifesto*.”

Pakcik Dollah's face grew even more weary, despite all its wrinkles. "This means—"

"That one of Lord Oldermat's supporters has snuck into the school," said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut from the door.

"Or Lord Oldermat himself," Harris said. When he saw the fear dance wildly in his Headmaster's eyes, he continued, "Lord Oldermat did not die, did he? The day he killed my parents, what happened?"

"I can't be sure," replied the Headmaster. "All I know is that something happened that night that greatly weakened him. He went into hiding, and his followers disbanded. What exactly happened? There were whispers that witnesses saw something running from your parents' home, screaming in pain, a shadow of something that was once great and human. Over the years, I received reports of an almost skeletal man hiding away in the void decks of Yishun.²⁵ Some reports describe him as 'more than shadow' but 'less than human'. He was seen feeding on cats to sustain himself. He was barely alive, and his followers have scattered to the winds. I hope this does not mean he's coming back." The old man stroked his long white beard. "Perhaps the book can shed more light on this matter. Bring it to me, Harris."

"Oh, sure...I'll bring it to your office after—"

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut interjected by reciting, "Lai lai, The Stoned Manifesto." Moments later, the thin, terrible tome flew up the stairs, through the corridor and into her hands. She walked over to Pakcik Dollah and handed the book to him.

"Hmm," he said gravely. "This is certainly not a positive turn of events." The Headmaster flipped the pages, chanting under his breath. "It's not cursed," he announced, but for some reason, Harris did not breathe easier.

"How do you think it got in here, Pakcik Dollah?"

"I don't know, but I will get to the bottom of this," Pakcik Dollah promised the children. Harris then noticed the Headmaster's eyes dart momentarily at the Mirror of Tatnap. "Heh heh, bottom."

23 Malay: "Are you crazy or something?" The phrase can be used for a variety

of instances, from being asked to go to the bathroom with your male friend to hearing someone suggest that anybody other than Alan Rickman could play Professor Snape.

24 Malay: toilet bowl. Also an effective insult for someone who is “full of shit”.

25 Yishun is also dubbed “The Devil’s Triangle”. The reasoning for this is unclear but there are three popular theories: 1) that someone inadvertently opened a portal to hell in those whereabouts; 2) that Lord Oldermat’s mere presence invokes all sorts of misdemeanours in the area; or 3) that the devil was once part of a band called the Spice Girls, but, being the evil and ugly one, he was relegated to playing the triangle. After a sordid bust-up, in which the devil called his bandmates Bitch Spice, Whore Spice, Old Spice Not-The-Deodorant, Retard Spice and Stupid Spice (we are legally not allowed to say which Spice Girl was referred to in those manners), the devil left the band and buried his triangle in the area, before joining the Jonas Brothers as back-up harmonica player.



Chapter 12: Go to Malaysia, Lah!

As the amount of schoolwork rapidly grew, May crept up quietly to Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. For most students, it meant they were closer to the mid-year and Hari Raya break. To Harris, it meant he finally had something to look forward to beyond the never-ending deluge of homework: the beginning of the void deck football season.

Over the past three months, the team had been training hard. Ron became first-choice attacker—his tall frame and composure in front of goal made him a natural choice. Harris was chosen as Fandi House’s midfielder, while Aizat moved back to defender. The other defender was a burly third-year boy named Cornek McLagging. Protecting goal was, of course, Oliver Newton John-Wood. They were clicking well as a unit, but more than that, Harris and Ron had instant chemistry on the pitch, regularly linking well to score. By late April, Aizat was so pleased with their progress as a team that every training session ended with him repeating his belief that this was the year.

Training also distracted Harris from Pakcik Dollah’s very slow “getting to the bottom” of The Stoned Manifesto mystery. He had checked in with the Headmaster with decreasing frequency. The few times that the Headmaster was actually in the school, he muttered irritably about Justout Beaver and his horrible music and stalked out. As the weeks became months and no sign of Lord Oldermat or any of his supporters appeared, the memory of the book and its sinister implications began to fade.

The night before the opening game against Halimah House, in the final week of May, Harris, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut were in the Fandi House common room tackling an essay about meritocracy.

“Professor Shila is crazy,” Ron whined. “There is no way I can finish eight hundred words by tomorrow.”

Meritocracy presented different problems to Harris and his friends. For Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, it meant not being able to falter—or even rest—for fear of being displaced by the people who had the same claims to merit as she did.

Someone once told her that humanity was divided along a bell curve, so she knew her A in this essay depended as much on her content as other people's inability to write essays worthy of an A. For Harris, it was the problem of defining "merit". "Talent", "productivity", "efficiency" and "well-endowed penis" were vague, subjective and easily interchangeable concepts that could be, well, merited as merit. For Ron, the problem was that he did not know how to spell "meritocracy".

Close to 10pm, Nabil Pantatpanjang and the Petal twins joined them.

"Social Studies essay?" Nabil asked, as he placed his own incomplete essay on the desk. The Petal twins, however, simply sat down and started taking selfies on their iPhones.

"Yeah," Harris, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said in unison without looking up from their respective essays.

"Same here." Nabil's pudgy arm began moving furiously as he put ink to paper.

IPodma craned her neck to check their progress. "My blessed sunflower of a sister and I are almost done with ours," she said haughtily.

"Oh?" said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, still nose-deep in her essay.

In her trademark aloof, flower-girl voice, iPadma announced, "My friends, souls of light, vassals of friendship, I wrote that meritocracy only works if you combined progressive Western ideals with socio-centric Eastern values."

"It will only work in that case? What makes you so sure?" Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut questioned, looking up from her essay. Harris looked at Ron, who mouthed, "I have no idea what they're talking about."

"Because I come from both worlds, Western and Eastern. We're pan-Asian, you see," she said haughtily.

"Yeah. You both definitely look like the love child of a pan and an Asian," said Ron without looking up from his homework.

Harris and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut fought hard to hide their laughter as the Petal twins stomped away furiously. Finally, at slightly after half-past eleven, they

dropped their essays on Professor Shila's desk in the staff room.

Back in their dorms, Harris had difficulty falling asleep, and even after he did, he was racked with terrible dreams. In one nightmare, he was on the void deck football pitch along with his Fandi teammates. When he turned to face his opponents, he saw that they were dark-skinned and faceless. And as his opponents played, they sang, from the place their mouths ought to be, an eerie, whispering rendition of "Chan Mali Chan". Harris awoke with a start, drenched in cold, sopping sweat.



The next morning in the Great Hall, Harris found Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut already having breakfast. A feeling of electric anticipation coursed through the air. The main topic of conversation among the tables was the coming game between Fandi and Halimah.

“You ready for today’s game, Ron?”

“I was born ready,” Ron said confidently. But his look of dogged determination shortly gave way to one of curiosity.

“What’s that sound?” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut asked.

Harris heard the loud flapping, rustling chorus last. A flock of birds—parrots, sparrows, owls—began gliding into the Great Hall. The birds circled and soared, diving and dropping letters and parcels on their intended recipients.

“Look!” Ron said, pointing towards one of the windows. “It’s Hedgefund.”

Harris looked up, and sure enough, his red-and-green-and-black parrot was flying towards them from the entrance. With a graceful pirouette, it landed on Harris’ shoulder. It then dropped two letters in front of its owner.

“Your fucking letters, assbutt,” squawked the parrot.

The first was from Uncle Pandir. It said: “Don’t come back for Hari Raya.”

“Hari Raya is in July,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut sympathetically.

“Yeah, Uncle Pandir is forward-looking like that.”

The second one did not have a return address, nor a sender’s name. Harris unfurled it lazily, believing it to be a follow-up from his relatives.

But it was not.

It simply said: “I will have my revenge, Harris bin Potter.”

His friends saw the look on his face and craned their necks to read the parchment.

“Who do you think sent it?” asked Ron.

Harris gave him a dark look. “I don’t know. But there’s only one person I know who would want to take revenge on me.”

“He’s dead! Come on!” Ron exclaimed. “You made sure of it.”

“Perhaps. More pressingly, whoever sent it knows that Hedgefund is your owl,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut whispered.

“Hedgefund,” Harris said to his owl, “do you know who sent this?”

“Fuck if I know, shitbrains,” squawked the parrot.

“Who attached it to your legs?” asked Ron.

“I didn’t fucking see, you ball-licker!”

“I want to kill that bird,” Ron muttered angrily to Harris.

“Come at me, you fuckface!” cried the bird, its feathers ruffling.

But Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut remained focused on the mystery at hand. “Where were you when the second letter was attached to you?”

“At shit central, the aviary.”

“Meaning it’s someone inside the school,” Harris said.

Before Harris could say anything more, Ron whispered urgently, “Hide it. Aizat is here.”

And within moments, the Fandi void deck football captain took a seat next to Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut. “Hello, guys,” he said to his teammates. He then turned to the girl beside him. “Hello uhh...”

“Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut,” she said politely, offering a hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” Aizat said rather quickly and sheepishly, before turning back to the boys. “We’re going to win today,” he said, pounding lightly on the wooden table.

“I highly doubt it,” came a familiar, grating drawl. They turned to face Double-D, a gang of menacing Trump boys behind him. A couple of them cracked their knuckles and growled. “I mean, looking at the three of you alone, I don’t think you have the athleticism to beat anybody at void deck football. Maybe you guys are better off cleaning void decks than playing football there. My father has contacts in several cleaning companies. I could—”

“Let’s get out of here,” Ron said, ignoring the Trump students. Aizat, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and Harris followed suit, Hedgefund perched on the latter’s arm. The parrot left a parting missive: “Go to hell, you camel nipples! Squawk!”

Aizat led them out of the school compound, and into the side entrance of the void deck football pitch. They were in a black-walled locker room where Oliver Newton John-Wood was putting on his goalkeeping gloves. Cornek McLagging was also gearing up, pulling up his socks. Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut hugged her two best friends, before heading out to take her place in the stands.

The Fandi void deck footballers were huddled together, while captain Aizat paced back and forth. Harris felt beads of cold sweat mottle on his temples. He could feel the drumbeat pulsing in his chest.

“It means nothing if we don’t win this game. Let’s start the season with a bang, guys,” Aizat said with conviction as he stood before his team in the dim light. “Keep it simple, and play as a team rather than individuals. More importantly, have fun.”

The captain then brought a hand out. The others piled theirs on his. “‘Fandi’ at the count of five!”

“One! Two!”

“Fandi!” shouted Ron.

“Five is after four,” Harris whispered quickly to his friend.

“Right.”

“One! Two! Three! Four!”

“FANDI!”

Harris stepped out of the players’ tunnel into the intense sunlight. Muffled voices became loud cheers. Nebulous shapes in Fandi reds and Halimah greens became more human above the glass ceiling of the void deck football pitch. It seemed like the entire school was there, even those from Haikel and Trump. Harris frowned involuntarily when he noticed Donnie Darko Malfay cheering with the Halimahs.

The referee, clad in black in the middle of the pitch, was the minute Professor Flickdick. “I have one thing to say,” he said as the teams took their places. “Play beautiful.”

And then, kick-off.

The Halimah team was centred around Sad-Rick Digahole, a handsome fourth-year student who, as the team’s chief playmaker, was the conduit for all their moves. They passed and moved slickly, and Harris found it difficult to keep up with their intelligent movement. Finally, ten minutes into the game, a brilliant lobbed pass from Sad-Rick caught the Fandi defence unawares and a simple tap-in from a Halimah striker gave the opposing team the advantage.

But the Fandi team forced its way back into the game when, following a determined run from defence and a quick exchange of passes with Harris, Aizat curled the ball into the top right corner of the Halimah net. One all.

Harris had very few chances to make something of the game, as the more physically imposing Halimah midfielders were able to easily shrug him off the ball. Some of his passes were wayward, while his attempts at dribbling usually ended in his being muscled out of possession.

“Come on, Harris! Stronger!” Aizat encouraged.

That was, of course, much easier said than done as physical strength did not come and go at mere words. The rest of the half was pretty much the same as its early minutes. The Halimah team passed and passed, but could not get past the two-person defence of Aizat and Cornek McLagging, who were playing with greater awareness after conceding that first goal. With Harris constantly being

muscle off the ball, however, the Fandi team did not have much time on the ball in the final third of the pitch, and Ron cut a solitary figure up ahead.

The game went into half-time at one all, both teams defending stoutly in a match that laboured to transition into offensive football.²⁶

In the locker room, Aizat's annoyance was obvious. "Harris, we need you to impose yourself on the game more."

"They're too big, too fast," Harris said.

"Maybe they are," said Ron. "But do you remember when the founder of our house, Fandi Ahmad, went to play football in Holland? Sial lah, all those European Svens and Klauses were bigger than him. It was like David versus... what's that giant's name?"

"Goliath?" offered Cornek McLagging.

"No," said Ron. He was clearly wracking his brain. Then, "Optimus Prime!²⁷ It's like David versus Optimus Prime!"

"I think that's the wrong saying," said Aizat.

But Ron did not hear his captain. "How do you think David would defeat Optimus Prime?"

"By turning into a tow truck?" Harris hazarded a guess.

"Wrong," said Ron. "By going to Malaysia."

"Wait, hold on," said Aizat, momentarily forgetting that they had an inter-House void deck football game to win. "How does David defeat Optimus Prime by—let me get this right—going to Malaysia?"

"Think about it," said Ron, as if his companions had been doing everything else but thinking about what he had said. "If David goes to Malaysia, Optimus Prime would have to travel overseas. He cannot fly—he can only transform into a truck. Which means David, assuming he flies, would reach Malaysia first. And then in Malaysia, because of their protectionist laws against land vehicles, compounded with the suspicions that arise from a self-driving truck, Optimus

Prime will be stuck in Malaysian customs for a long period of time. This allows David to gather enough acid to pour on the unsuspecting Optimus Prime while he's still in customs lock-up."

Harris started to point out the logical flaw in all this. "Why couldn't he just get acid from the start, when they were at—wherever it was they were fighting?"

Outside, Professor Flickdick blew his whistle.

"Don't question it," Aizat said, sounding almost deflated. "I guess the best advice we got from this team talk is 'Go to Malaysia'."

The Fandi team trudged out to the pitch. The cheers from the crowd were deafening, and Harris felt his chest swell and his shoulders straighten. He gave his team a smile.

Kick-off again, second half.

It took six whole minutes before play settled in a manner that allowed Aizat to pass comfortably to Harris. Just as it had been in the first half, two burly Halimah players closed in on him, so that he did not have a choice but to quickly pass the ball back to Aizat.

"Go to Malaysia!" Ron shouted from attack, pointing at the empty space behind the Halimah midfielders.

Harris, he hated to admit to himself, saw the wisdom in Ron's words. He immediately slipped into the space behind the midfielders—Malaysia, the land north, the space where the Halimah midfielders weren't occupying.

Aizat saw this, and immediately slipped the ball between the two Halimah midfielders. Harris received it, turned with the grace of a ballerina, and slid the ball past Sad-Rick Digahole into Ron's path. Ron finished with consummate ease. Two-one to Fandi House.

After gaining the lead, Fandi began to properly make their mark. Harris took "Go to Malaysia" to heart, wherever Malaysia might be. If the Halimah players congested the right side of the field, he would go to the left. If they swarmed the Fandi half of the pitch, Harris would slip into the Halimah half. It was one such occasion that allowed Aizat to pump the ball past all four Halimah outfield

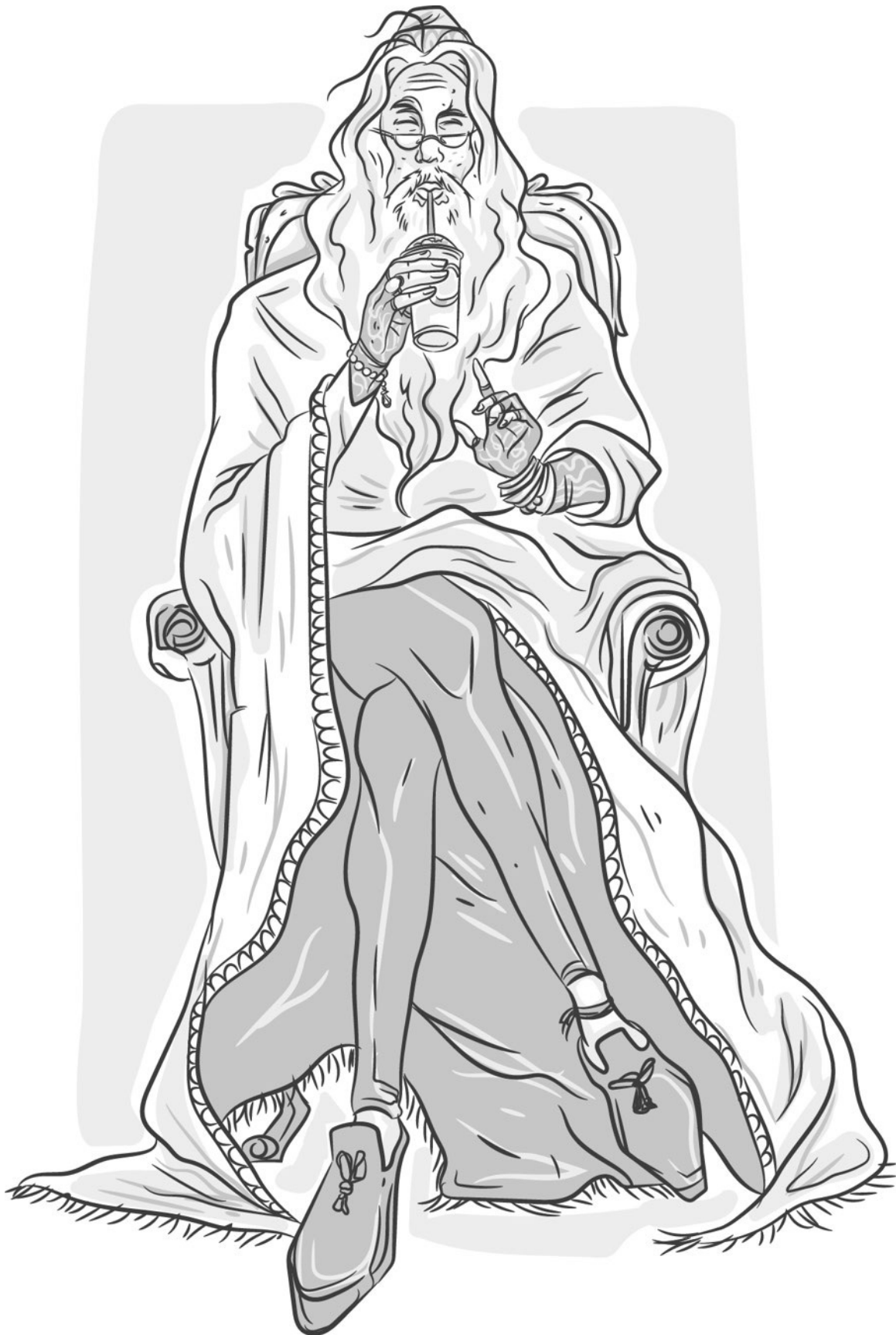
players, into Harris' path, and all the boy wizard had to do was to slide the ball between the legs of the Halimah goalkeeper. Three—one to Fandi House.

The roar that followed was deafening. The students from Fandi House were singing Harris' name. "Shout it out from Tampines to Boon Lay, Harris bin Potter will kick your ass today," they chanted, and they sang it from the moment he scored his goal, until Professor Flickdick brought his whistle to his mouth and called time on the game.

Final score: Three—one to Fandi House.

26 Also known as attacking football. Offensive football might be misconstrued as a sentient football that, for example, would say things like, "I think Malay people are just not academically inclined."

27 For those of you who do not know who or what an Optimus Prime is, it is a massive, intellectually and technologically superior alien robot that, for some inexplicable reason, uses its powers to transform into a truck.



Chapter 13: After Hours With Pakcik Dollah

Hours after the euphoria of victory had died down, Harris sat in his bed, rolling and unrolling the scroll that had arrived earlier that day. “I will have my revenge, Harris bin Potter.” He had read it for what can be best described as the umpteenth 28 time. Clearly, it was from Lord Oldermat, or one of his followers.

Harris checked the time. It was an hour past midnight. “Ron,” he whispered. “I’m going to Pakcik Dollah’s office.”

Ron simply replied with an arrhythmic snore.

Realising that he would probably have to go alone, Harris changed into an all-black outfit, put on a pair of sneakers and, perhaps due to his choice of shoes, sneaked out of the Fandi dorms.

The castle was deathly quiet.

Running on the balls of his feet, Harris made his way through the corridors, bounded silently down the staircase and rounded several corners, before sprinting past the Great Hall. At the far end of the vestibule, there was a large painting—at least twice as tall and wide as Harris—of a masculine Merlion, a steady flow of water cascading from its mouth into choppy seas below.

Upon seeing Harris, the painted creature stopped the flow of water, swallowed and said irritably, “What you want?”

“I’d like to see Pakcik Dollah, please,” Harris replied.

“You got appointment or not?” asked the Merlion, in a voice akin to some of the street gangsters Harris used to come across in Tampines.

“No, I don’t,” said Harris.

“Then you come here for what?”

Harris did not have an answer to that. But he was keen to keep the conversation

going, hoping to buy time to figure a way through. “Hey, what are you?” the boy asked the half-lion, half-fish creature brought to existence through oil paint.

“You don’t know meh?”

“Are you a lion-fish? A fishion?”

“I confirm efficient one.” The creature paused and studied Harris’ confused countenance. “You really don’t know ah? I’m a Merlion. Half-lion, half-fish.”

“How does such a thing even exist?”

“Oh, you see ah, when a lion and a fish like each other ah, they do a special type of dance—”

“Stop! Okay, I get it. Look, I just want to speak to Pakcik Dollah! It’s a matter of life and death.”

The Merlion shrugged, then simply slid aside, revealing a spiral staircase that led up into the shadowy unknown.

Up the stairs, there was a large oak door. Above it, there was a neon sign that blared out:

HEADMASTER’S OFFICE

And then, in smaller but equally neon wording:

IF YOU HAVE AN APPOINTMENT, KNOCK.

IF YOU DON’T HAVE AN APPOINTMENT...ALSO KNOCK.

IT’S THE POLITE THING TO DO.

The boy knocked.

A familiar, wheezing voice filtered through the door. “Harris, come in.”

Pakcik Dollah’s office can be described in many ways. The words “wonky” and “insane” come to mind. But Harris ignored all of that and passed a small library to a raised circular dais featuring nothing but a vast metallic table that had been spray-painted pink. Behind the desk sat Pakcik Dollah, dressed in a frilly, sequined jumpsuit. Despite the vivacious choice of outfit, the Headmaster seemed sapped of life.

“You should not be out and about at this time, Harris,” sighed Pakcik Dollah, but understanding fully the urgency that drove Harris here.

“Have you discovered anything?” Harris took a seat on the other side of the desk.

Pakcik Dollah perked up. “Do you know that diaries can get possessed? I never knew.”

“No, I mean about the book.”

“Which book? The Chamber of Secrets?”

“No! What book is that? I meant The Stoned Manifesto. Oldermat’s book.”

Pakcik Dollah sighed. “The book has a lot of enchantments that prevent me from performing any tracking spells. But if there’s anything I can glean off the really crappy poetry—I mean, the poetry is bad, like worse than Vagon poetry bad—I think he intends to take magic away from the people whom he deems ‘underserving’.”

“Can that actually be done?”

“There hasn’t been a precedent, I’m afraid,” said Pakcik Dollah gravely.

“There’s one more thing.” Harris fished out the scroll and placed it in Pakcik Dollah’s liver-spotted, wrinkled hands. “This came earlier today. ”

“Did your parrot know who put it there?”

“Nope.”

Pakcik Dollah rose, and made his way to a stained-glass window. It depicted a scene from the music video for Madonna’s “Like a Virgin”. He clasped his hands behind his back, and looked out into the starry night sky. “This is very worrying.”

“The Pope is Catholic. Lee Kuan Yew is from the People’s Action Party,” said Harris testily. “I know it’s worrying! We have to do something, Pakcik Dollah.”

The Headmaster began stroking his beard, and for a moment that seemed to stretch into infinity, he was silent. “I will handle it,” he said finally. “In the meantime, I want you to stay out of trouble. Don’t go anywhere alone. Always stay in a crowd.” He walked back to Harris and placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Let the adults handle this.”

But, of course, any story with children as its protagonists would be dreadfully short if, at that trope-worthy moment when an adult says, “Let the adults handle this” (or something to that effect), the protagonists actually listened to said advice and stayed out of the plot until the adults resolved it. The Neverending Story, for example, would need a new, vastly different title. Nevertheless, Harris nodded at his Headmaster’s words.

Pakcik Dollah headed back to his desk and slumped into his chair. “I’m sorry this happened under my watch, Harris. Lord Oldermat and I have...history. I could have stopped him once and for all. I should have.”

Harris looked at his Headmaster’s sequined jacket. “Do you mean that the two of you used to be lovers?” he asked, his voice bereft of judgement.

“No...I used to teach him.”

Before Harris could probe further, a loud shriek came from the direction of the Great Hall. Both Headmaster and student rushed out of the office, down the spiral staircase, past the portrait of the Merlion (“Why so kanchiong spider one you all?” it screamed) and towards the hall. A girl was running out of it. With the reflexes of a man with a lot less white beard, Pakcik Dollah grabbed her hand. She turned to the Headmaster, but her face was filled with glee rather than fear.

“What was that screaming about?”

“Justout Beaver just announced his new album!” she screamed.

28 Umpteen, while not an actual number, is fewer than a gazillion but more than a shitload.



Chapter 14: Justout Beaver

The year before Harris bin Potter enrolled into Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a singer, a dark wizard and a teacher walked into a bar. They passed an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman.

The bar was mostly empty, except for the grizzled barkeep, a man at the bar and a horse tethered to the stool next to his.

“Why the long face?” the dark wizard, chuckling at his own joke, asked the horse—something the horse and horses as a species did not appreciate.

The teacher chuckled nervously.

The singer was arching his neck and studying the dingy surroundings with the countenance of someone sharing a carpool with a chronic farter.

“What can I get you gentlemen?” asked the barkeep.

The singer called out, “Get me a graveyard,²⁹ so I can bury all memories of this place.”

“G-g-get m-m-m-m-me two sh-sh-shots of D-D-Dutch courage,” said the teacher, a gin person when he was nervous, which was most of the time.

“Get me unicorn’s blood,” said the dark wizard.

The barkeep looked at the dark wizard, which was quite a task, considering the fact that the wizard seemed to phase in and out of being—corporeal one moment and then barely coagulating wisps of smoke the next.

“Is that one of those new-fangled millennial cocktails?” he asked in the kind of voice that suggested he smoked a lot.

“No, I want actual unicorn’s blood.”

“We...” The barkeep paused, for he never thought he would have to make this

statement in his entire life. “We don’t have unicorns here. So by extension...we don’t have unicorn’s blood.”

“Oh, what good are you? Fine, get me a waterfall.”

The barkeep nodded and began preparing their drinks, while the singer began to sing, “Don’t go chasing water—”

“Shut up!” cried the dark wizard. “We can’t afford you singing that right now.”

The singer fell silent. After a while, he suddenly perked up again as if he just had an idea. “I read your book,” he added. “The Stoned Manifesto. I really, really like it. I especially liked the poem entitled ‘Masterplan’.”

The singer recited, “Roses are red/Dead violets are greying/Music hath charms to take/Magic from the undeserving.”

“Do you see, then, why I’ve called this meeting?”

“Because you want to kill some violets,” answered the singer triumphantly.

“No, you idiot!” With that emotional exertion, Lord Oldermat phased back into wisps of smoke. It was a few seconds before he became a fully-formed body again. “You see, when I crafted Chan Mali Chan, I realised that you can attach certain magicks to song. After years of tinkering during my exile, I realised that you can do the reverse. You can take away certain magicks with song.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” asked Justout Beaver excitedly.

“I believe I am.”

“Let’s say it at the count of three!”

“We don’t have to do that—”

“One!”

“Oh, we’re really doing this.”

“Two!”

Lord Oldermat sighed.

“Three!”

“Let’s write a song about pillow fights!” squealed Justout Beaver, as Lord Oldermat said exasperatedly, “I want you to produce an album that will allow me to siphon magic away from undeserving people.”

The singer was surprised by this. “What?”

The dark wizard repeated himself.

Justout frowned. Then, his frown became more pronounced. “But I want to write a song about pillow fights!”

“No! I need you to write songs based on my book, The Stoned Manifesto. That is how the spell will work. Nothing about goddamn pillow fights!”

“This is making me pissed on!” cried the singer.

“You mean pissed off.”

“No! I mean pissed on. Angry. Furious, as if I have been pissed on.”

“Look,” said the dark wizard with uncharacteristic patience, “you produce this album for me, and I will fund your next album, and you can write about anything in the world. Pillow fights—”

“Unicorn sex?”

“Yes.”

“The emancipation of pony porn stars from their evil corporate robot overlords?”

“Sure.”

“A death metal anthem to my favourite pair of yoga pants?”

“Whatever you want, my boy.”

“Fine. Then we have an accord.”

Singer and dark wizard shook hands.

The barkeep served the three men their drinks, and they drank in silence for the next few minutes.

“Wait!” said the teacher.

This startled Lord Oldermat. “Oh! Professor Pooh Quimak, I forgot you were here. Good god, man, you could have given me a heart attack.”

“Why did you call me here?” asked Professor Quimak. “What can I do to help?”

The dark wizard was ferociously trying to recall why he called the Philosophy of Magic teacher to this meeting. And then, he remembered. “Oh right! Yes, Professor Quimak...I need your butt.”

“What?”

29 The graveyard refers to a very potent alcoholic cocktail. To order an actual graveyard—tombstones and corpses and eerie nighttime mist and the works—requires more paperwork than an average bar would typically provide.



Chapter 15: A Very Harris bin Potter Hari Raya

On the morning of Hari Raya in July, Harris awoke to a now-unfamiliar situation: he was the only one in the Fandi boys' dorm. He thought back to how he used to wake up in the dank, dark kitchen sink cabinet, and while this was a marked improvement, he missed his friends. Harris took a quick shower, retrieved Hedgefund from his cage for company and shuffled out of the Fandi common room.

The painting of the footballer at the entrance was in a festive mood as well, sitting on a red picnic mat in the middle of a football pitch, eating ketupat and satays. "Selamat Hari Raya!" he called out to Harris.

The boy returned the greeting.

The corridors were empty—a fact that Harris found so alien after days upon days in which they were thronged by students.

"Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut have gone to their respective homes for Hari Raya," Harris muttered sadly to his parrot perched on his shoulder. "Back home to their loving families, their living parents."

"Squawk! You're a whiny little shit, aren't you?" Hedgefund's screech echoed through the walkways.

But Harris whined on, "They're probably eating ketupat and sambal goreng and chicken curry and all these delicious things. Pineapple tarts! I bet they're eating pineapple tarts!"

The parrot took off from Harris' shoulders and flapped away.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To the aviary...and away from your mopey butt!"

Harris watched as his bird flew away. Then, with the weight of loneliness upon his shoulders, the Boy Who Tak Mati shuffled his way to the Great Hall. As he

approached the hall, he heard something he did not expect: human voices. Harris peered past the Hall's great oak portal.

The teachers were gathered there, cheerily having breakfast.

"Good morning, 'arris! Selamat Hari Raya!" Hamid welcomed him happily. The breakfast spread was more sumptuous than ever: there was a pyramid of ondeh-ondeh; a large platter of satay, surrounded by a fragrant peanut sauce; ketupat sliced in wedges; spicy chicken rendang; aromatic chicken curry with large potato cubes; and penguin-sized carafes of ice-cold bandung to accompany the delectable fare.

With her wand, Professor Munira summoned a chair and nestled it between her seat and Pakcik Dollah's. "You're not going home for Hari Raya, Harris?" she asked.

"No," he replied, hating himself for the note of sadness in his voice. "I don't think my relatives want me back there."

"Come now, Harris," said Pakcik Dollah kindly. "We would be honoured to have you dine with us."

Professor Munira, so hospitable and accommodating and friendly outside the classroom, poured Harris a glass of bandung while he helped himself to satay. Hamid handed him a plate to place his used satay sticks—they would later be sent to Ollivadai's to be transmuted with magical energy and later resold as magical satay sticks.

"Thank you," Harris said.

"Oh think nothing of it," said Pakcik Dollah. "Now, eat. As we all should. As the sage philosopher George Burnt-Ends Shee-Shaw once said: 'There is no love sincerer than the love of food except for my love for my wife, I am totally saying this on my own accord, she is in no way forcing me to change my quote.'"

"Hear hear," cried the teachers, immediately after the phrase "love of food".

Harris took a bite of beef satay, and smiled at all of his teachers. "Where's Professor uh, Pooh?" he asked.

“Yes, where is he?” asked Pakcik Dollah through bites of ondeh-ondeh.

“I believe he’s taking a break,” said Professor #Ohsnap from the far side of the table. “He has been tired and worrisome of late.”

“He’s been worrisome of every day, to be honest,” quipped Professor Flickdick.

Harris threw a glance to Pakcik Dollah, hoping to find some clue, some betrayal in the Headmaster’s behaviour to indicate that he has gotten to the bottom of the mysteries surrounding Lord Oldermat. But the old wizard was smiling and doling out food, insisting people eat and make merry.

The boy helped himself to one more satay and made an excuse about catching up on homework. He then left, and indulged himself in his single obsession since Pakcik Dollah warned him about a certain forbidden room.

Harris made his way to the northeastern spire and bounded up the staircase until he was outside the seventh room of the seventh floor. He placed a hand on the knob, and tried to twist it. The knob did not budge. Harris withdrew his satay stick, pointed it at the knob and recited, “Alo-Open-Up-Lah!”

There was a triumphant click as Harris opened the door. The room laid out before him as it did before: bare, except for a closet and a large mirror set in an ornate wooden frame. He closed the door behind him and stood before the mirror.

Just as last time, an adult couple were in the mirror, bending over and showing their butts to him. But instead of fixating on their derrieres, Harris took in their faces. The man had messy hair like his, and he saw the woman’s nose and smile everytime he looked in the mirror. “Mama? Papa?”

They did not seem to hear the boy. The images continued smacking their butts at him, not acknowledging his presence. There was a soft click behind him. The boy turned—

“Harris,” said Pakcik Dollah softly, standing tall and gentle at the door. There was no admonition in his voice, no disappointment. Merely statement. “You’re here again.”

Harris nodded. “When I was last here, I saw two people in the mirror.”

“Your parents,” said Pakcik Dollah matter-of-factly. Headmaster and student stared silently into the mirror.

Pakcik Dollah then said almost sadly, “This mirror shows our deepest desires, the people we long to connect with the most.”

“Then shouldn’t it be called the Mirror of Desire?” asked Harris.

“Isn’t that too on-the-nose, Harris?”

“Or maybe something like...the Mirror of Erised?”

“Desire spelt backwards? Because it shows people’s behinds? No, no, no,” said the Headmaster shaking his head. “That is giving too much thought into the nomenclature of a mere mirror.”

Harris turned away from the mirror. More important thoughts were weighing on his mind. “Pakcik Dollah, have you figured out how The Stoned Manifesto got into the library. And who sent me that note?”

“I’m afraid not,” wheezed Pakcik Dollah sadly. “Whoever this was covered their trail really well. But worry not, Harris bin Potter. As long as you’re in this school, I will protect you.

“Now, I must insist you leave. It does not do well to stare at the past in its behind. I will be sealing this room with more powerful magic. Take your memory of this place with you, but you shouldn’t dwell in the past. The present is a gift pre-sented to you by the past. If you receive a love letter, cherish it for what it is now. If you look for its origins, all you’ll find is unprocessed tree bark. Its meaning in the present does not exist in the past. Do you know what I mean?”

“No,” Harris answered truthfully.

“Good,” said the Headmaster. “Neither do I. Neither do I.”



Chapter 16: Who Deserves Magic?

The school came alive again the following Monday morning when the students came back from their Hari Raya break. Harris greeted Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut at the Fandi common room.

“Look what my father got me!” Ron squealed upon seeing Harris. He held in his hands an album cover showing blonde boy with slick hair and a megawatt smile that could power an entire kampong. The title: Justout Beaver: Like, Ohmegerd, This Is My New Album You Guys.

“I can’t wait to listen to him, siol!”

“You like this stuff?” asked Harris, eyeing the album with apprehension.

“Bro, I’ve been listening to him since I was fifteen!”

“Ron, you’re eleven,” pointed out Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

Ron tried to do the Maths, but having seen this before and the futility of it, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut waved at him to stop.

The classes resumed as per normal—all except for one.

“Welcome back from your Hari Raya holidays, class,” said Professor Quimak with a smile. His nervous disposition seemed to have dissipated with the holidays. “It’s good to have all of you back.”

Ron, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and Harris exchanged puzzled glances. They clearly remembered Professor Quimak’s very first lesson.

“Today, we’ll be reading about Payn Indabutt Rant, better known just as Payn Rant, a truly great philosopher worth studying. Now take out your textbooks, and turn to page eighty.”

The students did as they were told, this time anticipating the blank pages within the book. Professor Quimak waved his satay stick—a confident, fluid movement

—and the pages filled with words and images.

“Chapter fourteen,” Harris read under his breath. “Who deserves magic?”

“Nabil Pantatpanjang,” called Professor Quimak. “Can you do us the honour of reading the first paragraph?”

Nabil quivered as he stood up. He had as much confidence for public speaking as a fish had for tree-climbing. “M-me, sir?”

Harris thought it was strange to see someone other than Professor Quimak stammer in Philosophy of Magic class.

“Yes, you. Is Nabil Pantatpanjang not your name?”

Harris detected a veneer of unkindness in Professor Quimak’s voice. What happened over the holidays that caused such a drastic change in the teacher’s behaviour?

At the front of the class, Nabil did not address the sarcastic question, and began reading. “Who deserves magic? This question has been asked many times by magical philosophers, as well as politicians, sociology academics and taxi drivers. While most answers are driven by political ideology and personal sentiment, there has been no conclusive study that draws a clear correlation between magical ability and specific human traits, from both demographic and psychographic standpoints. In short, there has been no scientific method of determining if any given human being deserved magic. Magical ability has manifested itself in the rich and the poor, the sick and the healthy, the religious and the nonreligious, the educated and the non-educated, the intellectual and the disinclined.”

Professor Quimak yawned. “Thank you, Mr Pantatpanjang. Mr Ali Evadass Izfarq, the second paragraph, please. And please don’t put us to sleep the way Nabil did.”

Nabil sat down morosely, as Ron stood up. “Sir, you can call me Ron.”

“I can,” said Professor Quimak smoothly. “I can also call you a Milo-addicted idiot with industrial grade glue for brains and a camel’s nutsack for a face. Would you like me to?”

“Eh, sial lah, no sir.”

“Good. Read the second paragraph of chapter fourteen.”

Ron cleared his throat. He then read, “However, there are other ways we can define the term ‘deserve’.”

As his friend read, Harris carefully studied the professor. He was far different from the stammering, bumbling ball of nerves he was earlier in the year. The other students from Fandi House noticed it as well, and they were all staring at their teacher through the lens of disquietude and curiosity rather than listening to Ron.

Ron had read most of the second paragraph when Harris returned his attention to him. “There are various ways to determine if an individual deserves magic. Magical scientists and philosophers have come up with many experiments over the years, starting with classical Greek philosopher Perdesthaius’ infamous method of dropping individuals off a cliff to see if they could fly—a clear indicator of magic. Of course, not all magical individuals attain the ability to fly, and this experiment went terribly awry, resulting in the deaths of magical and non-magical folk alike. The most recent experiment, before the formation of the International Ethical Body for Magical Study, was performed by Payn Indabutt Rant and Surewin Nosedigger.”

“Thank you, Mr Izfarq,” said Professor Quimak blandly, “for nothing.”

Ron sat down, and threw Harris and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut a look of confusion and incredulity. They could not say anything in return, for their teacher was already speaking.

In a clear, confident voice that the students would never have associated with him, Professor Quimak said, “When Payn Rant and her friend Surewin Nosedigger came to Singapore shortly after the kosongs’ Second World War, they devised an experiment, which we now refer to as Nosedigger’s Malay. In it, Payn Rant and Surewin Nosedigger took30 a Malay wizard and placed him in a room whose walls were lined with faulty wands. These broken wands would cast spells at random. Most of them would get him food or water. But they were also capable of casting killing spells. Because he was magical, the Malay wizard would be able to conjure protective spells with his satay stick. But if he was deserving of magic, he would not be killed by random, indiscriminate broken

wands. Some say that this experiment was the precursor to the Schrödinger's cat experiment.”³¹

“With all due respect, sir,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut. “I think both experiments are flawed because they do not take into account the perspective of the subjects. Schrödinger's cat explores quantum superposition, that a cat might be dead and alive at the same time. But to the cat, Schrödinger himself might be a quantum blur, whose existence is unquantifiable and unqualifiable until that box he is imprisoned in is opened. The cat would know if he's dead or alive, even if Schrödinger did not. Similarly, only the Malay wizard can determine if he's deserving of magic or not—that is his relationship with magic, and nothing that Ms Rant and Mr Nosedigger do can affect, or even study, that.”

For several moments, there was silence, as Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut's eyes bore into Professor Quimak's. There was a blazing defiance in her eyes, and this, combined with her impassioned dismantling of the wisdom behind Nosedigger's Malay experiment, made Harris look upon his friend with newfound awe.

“Ten points from Fandi House,” Professor Quimak announced.

“What?” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was incensed. She rose to her feet and banged her desk. “This is not fair, sir.”

But their teacher pressed on smoothly, “Ten points for speaking without raising your hand, forty points for thinking outside the syllabus, and another fifty points because I don't like your face.”

Ron stood up to protest fiercely, but Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut gestured for him not to, and they both sat down. “Not now,” she whispered to Ron and Harris. “There's something off about Professor Quimak, and we need to figure out what it is.”

The rest of the lesson made Harris sick. Professor Quimak spoke with sordid glee about the Malay wizard from Payn Rant and Surewin Nosedigger's experiment being found dead at the end of the experiment, a killing-spell wound in his back. The professor brushed off the students' distraught reactions, saying that the Malay wizard was unworthy anyway.

The rest of the Fandi House first years were unable to get into the lesson as well. They only watched with increasing distress as Professor Quimak waxed lyrical

about individuals undeserving of magic.

After class, during their break, Harris, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut sat together at the far end of the Fandi table in the Great Hall. They were discussing what was on the minds of all the Fandi first years. “There’s something wrong with Professor Quimak,” Harris said.

“Y-y-y-you mean something wronger than usual?” said Ron, imitating the teacher’s former nervous tics.

“He’s not himself,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut worriedly. “I looked into his eyes. There was something else there, something not Professor Quimak. Before this, he was lost, out of his depth. Today, it’s like...someone else has taken over his body.”

“That is very scary sial!” cried Ron.

That evening, they returned to their dormitories after a sumptuous dinner of rojak and chicken rice. Most agreed that it was the perfect meal to have upon returning from their Hari Raya breaks. Others were like, “We’re vegetarian.”

Among them, Ron was zipping happily back, Harris and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut struggling to trail him.

“I can’t wait to listen to the album, siol!” he shouted at them from more than twenty metres ahead. “Music is life, and Justout Beaver is MUSIC!”

“Have you ever seen him this excited?” asked Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“I think only once, for a plate of ondeh-ondeh.”

In the western wing, they went up the stairs that led to the dormitories. They turned left at the corridor, and reached the wall-to-ceiling portrait of Fandi Ahmad in a red football jersey adorned with the number seventeen. “Hello, friends,” he said. Currently, he was shuttling a football between his feet. “What is the password?”

“Bicycle kick,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut almost lazily.

“...is a horrible thing to do to a cyclist, but a magnificent way to score a football

goal,” replied the portrait, before it swung open to reveal a small doorway into the Fandi House common room.

Once in their rooms, Ron pulled on his headphones, played the Justout Beaver album and retired. In the bed next to Ron’s, Harris fell asleep very quickly.

30 Most historians agreed that the two paid thugs to kidnap the Malay wizard, a fact lost to a history that favours telling the stories of Europeans who visited Asia, rather than the Asians being visited upon.

31 It was not.

Chapter 17: A Waste of White Space

“Today, we’ll be learning a nifty new spell,” Professor Flickdick said chirpily at class the next day. “A shield spell, to protect you from all manner of sinister spells.”

“All spells?” asked Harris. “Even Chan Mali Chan?”

The entire class gasped at him. It was a sensitive topic. Chan Mali Chan had hurt many families. Of course, none of them in class had it as bad as Harris, who lost both his parents to the spell.

“Yes,” said Professor Flickdick, pressing on with positive energy. “Even Chan Mali Chan.”

Harris, Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut perked up. If The Stoned Manifesto was placed in the school library for sinister reasons, then this might be a very important spell for them.

Professor Flickdick drew his satay stick and walked to one side of the classroom. “Ron, can you come up to the front with me?”

Ron obliged, standing at the other side.

“Draw your satay stick.”

Ron did.

“Cast a stunning spell.”

Ron did not. “I don’t know that spell.”

“Point your satay stick at me and say, ‘Stupefy.’”

IPodma Petal raised her hand. “Do we have the permission to cast—”

Professor Flickdick shushed the girl and waved irritably for her to shut up. He

repeated his orders to Ron.

“Okay.” Ron pointed his satay stick at his teacher. Hesitantly, he chanted, “Spotify!”

Nothing happened.

“No, you gundu!” cried Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut from her seat. “It’s Stupefy not Spotify!”

“Oh right.” Ron tried again, this time correctly. “Stupefy!”

Nothing happened again. “What’s going on?” Ron asked, his voice and countenance betraying his fear and confusion.

“Ron,” called Professor Flickdick from the other side of the classroom, “is something wrong?”

Ron tried again. He pointed his satay stick at the professor again and shouted more intensely, “Spoti—I mean, STUPEFY!” And then he stood there, stupefied, because no magic was happening. “What’s happening to me?”

“Did you bring a magical satay stick, or did you accidentally bring a satay satay stick?” asked his teacher.

“This is mine!” Ron said indignantly. He then took off his shoe, threw it onto the floor just before him, pointed his satay stick at it and recited, “Mangkuk, siol!” The shoe remained, as it always had been, a shoe. The class began laughing, albeit rather nervously, unsure if this was some joke or if something truly horrifying was sapping Ron of his magic.

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut rushed to Ron’s side. She grabbed his satay stick and pointed it at Professor Flickdick, who stood at the ready again. “Stupefy!” she shouted. A bright red jet of magical light arced through the air towards the diminutive professor. The class stopped laughing and fell silent, their attention focused instead on the bright red light. Ron watched it too, and the excuse he had given himself for his magickus nihilo was proven null: it wasn’t that his satay stick didn’t work. There was something wrong with his magic. There was something wrong with him. Harris’ eyes met with Ron’s. The panic was clear in his friend’s eyes.

Meanwhile, Professor Flickdick had moved his satay stick in a circular motion while reciting, “Aegis, lah!” A glowing blue wall emerged from the end of his satay stick. The red stunning spell hit the wall, and dissipated into thin air. The professor gestured for Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and Ron to return to their seats.

He then got the class to practise the spell. “Satay sticks in circular motion, and then, loud and clear: AEGIS!”

Harris and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut tried, and proud, sturdy walls of magical blue emerged from their satay sticks.

Ron sulked in his seat, not bothering to try the spell. But he did not do that for long, for cries of confusion, similar to the ones he had expressed earlier, soon filled the class.

It turned out that Ron was not the only one with a magical problem. Nearly half of the class were impotently casting spells with their satay sticks. The Petal twins were among them. “This is not possible,” said iPodma, the haughty indignation that seemed to always drench her words giving way to burning, legitimate fear. “We are beings of magic,” she added, mainly referring to her sister and herself.

“This might happen to a poor street commoner like you,” said iPadma, pointing at Ron as if she were an unwilling docent explaining an exhibit at a turd museum, “but not to us. We are important, we are of mixed heritage, we have hundreds of thousands of social media followers and we are rich! These things do not happen to us! Professor, do something!”

Within the hour, the entire school was divided. Harris, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and about fifty other students were led to the Great Hall where they sat on their respective House tables. The others, including Ron and the Petal twins, were led outside to the courtyard. Strangely enough, most of Trump House were inside the Great Hall.

At about three in the afternoon, Professor Munira McTonerill entered and addressed them. “It appears that all your peers in the courtyard have lost their magic. We do not know how it happened, but they are otherwise healthy. As far as we know, it is a complete loss. None of them have showed signs of partial magic loss. We are doing all we can to get to the bottom of this.”

Harris groaned. This was exactly what Pakcik Dollah had said, over and over again.

“We will be suspending Spelling class, and classes that require satay stickwork, until this problem is resolved. All other classes will resume. I urge all of you to show love and support to your friends in these distressing times.” Professor McGronnagrall looked absolutely forlorn.

The students were then told to return to their dorms. When Harris, the only first-year boy in Fandi House who was unaffected, did so, he found a familiar figure sitting on Ron’s bed.

“Harris, will you forgive an old fool?” said Pakcik Dollah.

The boy sat on his own bed and faced his Headmaster.

“I should have done more to protect my students.” The Headmaster buried his face in his hands. “I am very sure all of this is connected. I’m just unsure how exactly.”

Harris thought hard. Among all those who had lost their magic, he knew Ron best. The clues must be there. He scanned his best friend’s bed, before resting his eyes on the square object next to his pillow. It was the Justout Beaver album. Harris held it aloft in his hands. “This! I think this has something to do with it!”

“You think so?”

“I can feel it in my gut,” said Harris stubbornly. The boy handed the album over to his Headmaster, who studied it warily. “Ask the students who lost their magic—did they listen to Justout Beaver?”

The next day, after interviewing all the students who had lost their magic, Pakcik Dollah confirmed Harris’ suspicions: all of those who had lost their magical abilities listened to Justout Beaver’s album.

And so the connection was made, but if there’s anything Pakcik Dollah is known for, it’s for having zero plans whatsoever.



Chapter 18: The Toyols in the Toilet

The Haikel–Fandi void deck football game played out the following week with a trudging listlessness. Haikel House, whose entire team had lost their ability to perform magic, played with disinterest. It was the same for the Fandi team, with the exception of Harris. The game put most of the crowd to sleep, and the only goal was scored near the end when Harris played a long pass to Ron, who lost his balance as he ran for the ball. He accidentally hit the bouncing ball with the tip of his nose, and the ball trickled past the Haikel goalkeeper, who did not expect Ron to make contact with it.

The win allowed Fandi House to keep up with Trump in the void deck football standings. Trump led only due to the fact that they scored more goals in their victories over Haikel and Halimah Houses. But Fandi was level on points, and all they needed was a win next week to secure the Inter-House Void Deck Football Cup.

Despite this, a gloom overtook the school, as lethargic, unmagical students tried to make sense of life in a magical school. Ron was withdrawn and tended to daydream as Harris and Her-Aku-Punya discussed plans to draw Lord Oldermat or his follower(s) out into the open.

“I could just stand up during breakfast, and say, ‘Screw Chan Mali Chan! That spell couldn’t kill me. Lord Oldermat can kiss my ass!’ Something to that effect?”

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut giggled at the thought but said seriously, “No, that’s too risky.”

Their conversation was cut short when Aizat walked over to them. “Tomorrow, we win the Inter-House Void Deck Football Cup,” he said, clapping Ron and Harris on their shoulders. “Tonight, sleep early and rest well.” The Fandi captain did not sound convincing. Harris realised that Aizat, too, had lost his magic.

The next morning, members of Trump House were distributing fliers at breakfast. In large, jagged font, they advertised a double feature before the Fandi

versus Trump game: singer Justout Beaver and actress Lindsay Longan would be performing in the courtyard.

“Let’s go watch Justout Beaver!” cried Ron, showing some life for the first time since he listened to the singer’s album.

“We should be warming up rather than watching Justout Beaver. I’d sooner watch Lee Hsien Loong’s reggae band, The Pap Marleys.”³²

Ron threw his best friend a sharp, scathing look. He then got up and stormed off.

“Oh, you goddamn boys,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said tiredly, having watched all this in silence. “You know he feels lousy after losing his magic,” she admonished Harris. “You should be nicer to him.”

Harris sighed. “It’s the music. I don’t have proof, but it’s the music.”

“What about the music?”

“It’s taking away their magic.”

Harris got up, leaving Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut aghast, and rushed after Ron who was making his way down the corridor to the toilets. Up ahead, they saw a familiar blonde visage leaning against the wall.

“Lovers’ quarrel?” Double-D sneered as the two boys stalked past him.

“Shut up, Malfay!” the two boys shouted back in unison.

Ron entered the boys’ toilet, and stopped before a sink. He stared into the mirror, his face expressionless. Harris entered after him, and took the sink next to him. The cubicles were all full, so he hoped Ron would not cause too much of a scene.

“Look, Harris, bro, everything sucks for me. I can’t perform magic, and I don’t even know why. If this doesn’t change, what if I have to live the rest of my life being a...kosong? What if I have to get a...what do you call those things...a degree at a universe city?”

“University.”

“And then a JOB? What if I have to work at a...fat-three?”

“Factory.”

“Yes, that! What if I can never perform a spell ever again? Can’t change a toad into a toadstool. Can’t change a turd into a stool. Can’t change anything into a stool, really. What kind of existence is that siak?”

“An awesome one nevertheless,” said Harris, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Because even without magic, you’re still you. But in the meantime, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and I will do all we can to help you get your magic back.”

“You really mean that?”

“Yeah. I swear upon Netflix.”

“What’s a Netflix?”

“It’s the thing kosongs use to have magic in their lives.”

“Magic is not about casting spells,” said Harris, even though he knew that casting spells was definitive of magic itself. “It’s about the spark inside you.” Harris was sure he read that on a Hallmark card somewhere.

“Thank you, Harris.”

And suddenly: BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

A knocking from the cubicle farthest away startled them.

“Is someone there?” Ron ventured.

BOOM! The cubicle rattled.

The boys then heard voices—high-pitched squeaking voices.

And then, with a quaking crash, the door flew open. Out crawled tiny little toyols—impish, goblin-like creatures with sallow grey skin and razor-sharp, shark-like teeth. They growled menacingly at the boys. Toyols were known for their bloodlust and manic demeanour—something Harris and Ron were not interested in finding out first-hand.

“Mangkuk, siol!” cried Ron, pointing his satay stick at one of the toyols. Like before, nothing happened.

The tiny things hissed and bared their fangs.

Harris pointed his satay stick at the one nearest to them. “Mangkuk, siol!” This time the toyol turned into a nongrowling, grey porcelain bowl.

Harris pulled at Ron’s collar and dragged him out of the toilet. The two rushed down the corridor, not bothering to turn to see if the toyols could open the door. At the end of the corridor, Harris turned a corner and slammed his face into the chest of an adult. He looked up, and relief flooded his face.

“Professor Quimak, help! There are toyols in the toilet!”

The scrawny professor, usually so timid and soft-spoken, turned to Harris with a smile that can be best described as “creepy”, “predatory” or “paedophile stereotype exhibit A”. And then he laughed, “Well, of course there are, Harris. I’m the one who put them there.”

“What?” Ron cried.

“I put them there! Do I have to spell it for you two? E-Y-E P-O-O-T D-E-M—”

“No, I get that! But why?” asked Harris.

“So I can get you here alone...” The professor was addressing Harris only.

The two boys waited for their Philosophy of Magic teacher to finish the thought.

“...and have my revenge.”

“Revenge? Look, Professor Quimak, just because I got a C in your last test—”

“No, you fool!” The teacher’s voice was shaking with an almost inhuman anger. And then, he spoke again, but Harris saw that his lips were merely quivering with anger. The more peculiar thing was that his voice seemed to be emanating from his derriere, and not his mouth. “My revenge,” hissed the voice from Professor Quimak’s butt.

“Professor, what’s going on?” It was starting to dawn on Harris. The professor’s behaviour, the mysterious letter, the massive loss of magic...

“I’ll show you what’s going on,” said Professor Quimak with his mouth. The man then proceeded to unbuckle his trousers in front of the eleven-year-old boy.

It was at that time that Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, wishing to check in on her friends, reached them. “Harris!” she called. “Ron! Have you two made up? What are you...”—then she saw Professor Quimak—“What is Professor Quimak doing?”

By then, the professor had fully shed his trousers and was standing before them, naked from the torso down.

“Oh, come on, Professor!” cried Ron. “We’re only eleven years old!”

But the professor ignored the children. With slow, deliberate movements, he turned around and bent over. Where his buttocks were supposed to be, there was a face. Its nose protruded out from the cleft of the buttocks, and where an anus should be, there was a wide, sneering, thin-lipped mouth.

Harris’ scar started to hurt. It was a prickly, tolerable pain at first, but it grew into searing agony.

“Harris bin Potter,” hissed Professor Quimak’s butt. “We meet again.”

“I’m very sure we have never met,” Harris groaned at the butt. He was not entirely convinced by his own words.

“Oh, but you have been a pain in my butt...” the face trailed off, as though realising where it was situated. “... You’ve been an annoyance since the night I tried to kill you. And now, revenge is mine.”

Even as the pain in his forehead grew more terrible, Harris found it hard to feel intimidated by a talking face-butt.

“Who are you?” asked Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

The professor’s butt laughed a mirthless guffaw. The professor then stood up. With empty, glazed eyes, the Philosophy of Magic teacher spelled out with his wand “PROFESSOR POOH QUIMAK’S BUTT” in glowing letters hanging

magically in the air. He then made a move with his hand like a DJ scratching a record, and the words remixed, as it were. They shifted and moved and rearranged themselves into: “I AM LORD OLDERMAT”.

“It’s an anagram,” Professor Pooh Quimak declared with gusto.

“Err, I think you missed out a few letters,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut.

“And added a few more,” added Harris.

“Idiot!” cried Lord Oldermat/Professor Quimak’s derriere. “Do you even know what an anagram is?”

“Of...of, of-of-of course, Lord Oldermat.” The professor was practically grovelling.

“Give me an anagram of ‘blondie’, then,” challenged Lord Oldermat.

“Please, Lord Oldermat, is this the right time to do this?” the professor said in the direction of his butt, pointing at the children.

“GIVE ME AN ANAGRAM OF BLONDIE!” yelled Lord Oldermat, a deep boom from the professor’s butt.

“Uhhhh, oh god oh god oh god,” Professor Pooh Quimak simpered. “Uhhh... Britney Spears?”

“WRONG, YOU FOOL!”

“Please, master,” said Professor Quimak, his body still twisted so he could direct his words towards his buttocks. “Why, I bet even these mangy kids don’t know what an uhhh...an...what do you call it—ah-neh-gramp for ‘blondie’ is.”

“Lone bid,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said as easily as breathing air.

“Lion bed,” Harris offered.

Even Ron came up with, “Oil bend.”

All Professor Quimak could say in response was, “Ah crap.”

Down below, at Professor Quimak's ass, Lord Oldermat was raving and growling incoherently in anger at his subordinate. "I've had enough of your incompetence, Pooh!" he screamed before chanting, "Colonialis Corpus!"

A truly peculiar thing happened. Professor Pooh Quimak's thin, sallow face seemed to melt, and a puddle of human material began flowing around his neck, down his back and towards his naked buttocks.

Moving in the opposite direction was another misshapen mass of human material; it reformed upon Professor Quimak's head. This face was brown-grey, hairless, its nose aquiline. The lips were paper thin, and the teeth behind them were black as an emo kid's eyeliner. It was the same face that, not too long ago, was speaking to them as Professor Quimak's butt.

"Put me back at my head!" Professor Quimak, now at Lord Oldermat's ass, was protesting, but the dark lord waved his wand and conjured a butt plug out of thin air. He then put the butt plug in Professor Quimak's mouth, and the Philosophy of Magic teacher could only suckle on it like a pacifier, while Lord Oldermat let out an involuntary, "Ooh!"

With the dark wizard distracted, Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said, "You two slow him down, I'll go get Pakcik Dollah."

"All right," said Harris, standing in front of Ron. Not interested in waiting for the butt plug to settle, Harris pointed his satay stick at Lord Oldermat and recited, "Stupefy!" The jet of red magical light hit the evil wizard square in his chest. Lord Oldermat stumbled backwards, but recovered to cast Chan Mali Chan.

"Aegis!" Harris yelled, his heart threatening to leap from his chest. Other than the time when he was a baby, Harris had never had a killing spell cast against him, and the realisation gave rise to palpable fear.

The shield forced the spell to dissipate impotently, but the boys were knocked off their feet.

"I think we should run," Ron suggested, after processing the sweet relief of being alive.

Harris nodded, and they ran.

32 For legal reasons, I have to state that no such band exists, and nothing in the public record is indicative of Mr Lee's abilities as a reggae musician, mon.



Chapter 19: Fandi Versus Trump

They ran as fast as their legs could carry them, away, away from their nemesis Lord Oldermat. They ran until they were out of the castle, and rays of sunshine bathed their faces—faces that were contorted in fear and apprehension.

They ran until they reached the void deck football arena, where all their teachers and fellow students had already gathered in anticipation of the pre-match concert. On the stage was the musical superstar Justout Beaver and another celebrity named Lindsay Longan. Harris wondered if Lindsay Longan was just paid to be there, or if she was also a lackey of Oldermat's.

The singers had not begun singing yet. They were warming up the crowd with refrains of, “When I say, ‘di mana dia’, you say, ‘anak kambing saya’!”

Ron and Harris ran onto the stage.

“Professor Pooh Quimak is Lord Oldermat!” Ron cried to the gathered crowd.

“No, Ron!” Harris said urgently. To the crowd, he announced, “Professor Pooh Quimak’s butt is Lord Oldermat! Or at least—was.”

There was the silence of a crowd trying to process what Harris had just said. And then, there was a collective gasp.

Behind them, Lord Oldermat was rising up to the stage.

The audience broke into feverish whispers.

“Is that Lord Oldermat?”

“Isn’t he dead?”

“I thought he doesn’t have a nose?”

“Yes,” said Lord Oldermat, his voice magically amplified. “It is I, Lord Oldermat! And I am alive, and more powerful than I have ever been because I

have taken magic from those of you who do not deserve it, and transferred it to myself, a far more superior, far more deserving vessel for magic. Also, I have a nose.”

Some of the students jeered. Trump House cheered.

“And the perfect way to celebrate my return to power is to watch my old house, Trump, defeat the lame minnows Fandi!” The tall, spindly wizard then turned to Harris. “And wouldn’t it be sweeter that this victory comes at the expense of the boy who stripped my power in the first place—Harris bin Potter.”

Harris opened his mouth for a clever reply (he was thinking of, “At least I didn’t have to steal my power from kids”) but he did not get the chance.

“Like a Malay footballer with no concept of shape, you will kick the bucket, Harris bin Potter!” cried Justout Beaver.

“Yeah!” shrieked Lindsay Longan, confirming her alignment in all the chaos. Behind the two of them, the Trump void deck football squad were onstage and looking menacingly at Harris, their arms folded. Harris noted that two of them were clearly adults, their hairy forearms veiny and muscly.

Aizat and the rest of the Fandi team took this opportunity to line up behind Harris and Ron, and they, too, stared down the Trump team.

“Ooh!” squealed Justout. “Looks like the drama is beginning! Do we want to see some void deck football?”

For the first time that day, the entire school agreed on something. “Yeah!” they shouted in unison, Trump and non-Trump alike.

“Today’s game will be officiated by Lindsay Longan!” the singer announced, gesticulating at the actress beside him.

No way, Harris thought. “Her?”

Lindsay Longan pulled out a certificate, indicating that she had the training and expertise to referee football games at the grass-roots level.

“Where’s Professor Flickdick?” Ron demanded.

“He’s predisposed,” drawled Double-D behind the celebrities.

“And who, in the name of Yusof Ishak’s delivery boy, are those two?” Ron asked, pointing at the two adults in the Trump jerseys.

Double-D gestured for the two adults to follow him as they crossed the stage and stood before the Fandi team. One of them was clearly in his twenties. His tanned features suggested he was from the northern regions of Southeast Asia. Upon reaching them, he adopted a boxer’s stance and punched the air with quick jabs, making blowing sounds with his mouth. “This is Tomyam Cruise, a Thai professional kickboxer,” drawled Double-D. He then gestured at the other adult, who looked slightly younger than Tomyam Cruise, and whose features suggested he was Korean. “And this is Sejook Panas, who is a former professional football winger. That’s right, buttbrains, I have an ex-winger and a Thai fighter.”

“But they’re not students,” Harris pointed out.

“Wrong, orphan,” Double-D sneered. Lindsay Longan handed him two pieces of paper. “They were enrolled earlier today and duly sorted into Trump House.”

Harris snatched the documents from his adversary’s hands. Being eleven years old, he did not know what enrolment papers were supposed to look like, never having even seen his own. It seemed legitimate enough, however, as Pakcik Dollah’s name and probable signature and official seal added some credibility to the parchments.

“Fine,” Harris said hesitantly, handing the documents back. Then, with more confidence, “We’re going to beat you Trumps anyway.”

“Oh you wish, Harris,” boomed Lord Oldermat’s oil-slick voice. “You and your band of pretenders do not have what it takes.”

Harris looked around him. His teammates seemed daunted by the task ahead. The rest of the school, save the students in Trump House, looked on sadly, as they processed the prospect of being ruled by Lord Oldermat. His only hope was that whatever was holding up Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut with Pakcik Dollah would resolve itself quickly. Or maybe, he could simply defeat the Trump House void deck football team. “I’ll hold you to it, Lord Oldermat,” he said. “If you win—”

“You die before your friends and the entire school,” Lord Oldermat said, with a

burning intensity.

“And if we win—”

“You won’t,” said the dark wizard flatly.

“If we win, you have to return everyone’s magic, leave Singapore and never come back.”

Not wanting to give Lord Oldermat the satisfaction of a response, Aizat called for his team to huddle. “This is the fight of our lives, you guys,” said the captain. He then looked sympathetically at Harris. “And it looks like a fight for your life, Harris. Are we scared of them?”

The rest of the team nodded.

“Why?” Aizat asked.

“The fact that they’re not Singaporean scares me!” Ron said nervously. “They’re surely better—in football at the very least. I mean, in satay-making, I think we trump, heh heh, them, but in football, they will freaking skewer us, man!”

But Aizat replied, “But they’re human, just like us. With limitations. We play to our strengths, and we draw out their weaknesses.”

It was like a fire had reignited in the Fandi House captain, like some kind of magic had returned to him. It wasn’t the kind that allowed him to cast spells, but perhaps, just perhaps, it could win them a void deck football game.

“Teams!” yelled Lindsay Longan. “Take your places!”

There was a flurry of movement. The whole school took to the stands, while the teams went to the changing rooms. Thirty seconds before six o’clock, the Trump and Fandi teams lined up on opposite sides of the void deck football pitch. Between them, Lindsay Longan, the very obviously partial referee.

She brought her whistle to her lips, and with the skill of someone with a lot of practice blowing, she blew.

Trump House kicked off. Double-D Malfay was their striker, and he was

supported by Sejook Panas and a towering bulwark of a fourth-year student named Juice Jenner in midfield. Bringing up the rear was Tomyam Cruise.

The Trump team did not allow the Fandi team any time on the ball. As soon as anybody on the Fandi team got the ball, Juice Jenner or Tomyam Cruise would come in with an ankle-crushing tackle. All of them were clear fouls, but with Lindsay Longan as the referee, they were all deemed fair play.

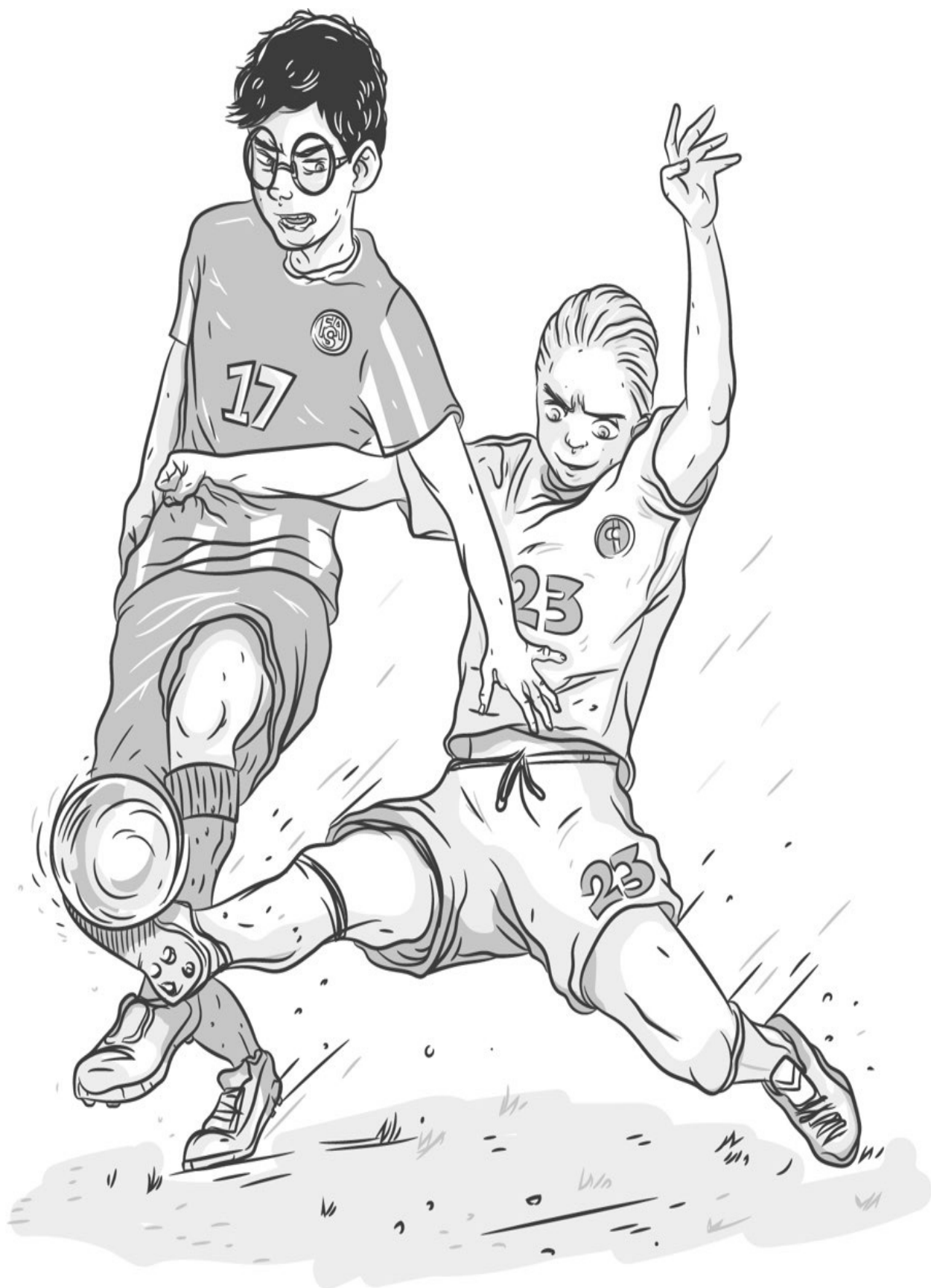
Eventually, in the eleventh minute, Juice Jenner literally carried Harris off the ball, and, holding the first year aloft in one hand, passed to Double-D, who, thanks to Sejook Panas' shoving Aizat away, was left with a simple tap-in past Oliver Newton Wood-John.

Before half-time, they repeated the same tactic twice: Juice Jenner used his hands to lift Harris off the ball and passed it to an unmarked Double-D, who could probably score even blindfolded.

At half-time, the score was three–nil.

Back in their locker room, Aizat was thinking about playing with four players. “I don’t know if we can win this, but Harris, they’ll kill you. Leave now. Run away. Hide. We’ll buy you some time.”

Harris stood up. “No, Aizat. I fight with you. With all of you. Lord Oldermat has taken away your magic. I didn’t know I had magic in me until last year, and if there’s anything I learnt, it’s that we were all born deserving of our magic. Nobody has the right to take it away. I’m not going to let some racist, fascist pig take it away. I’m in this to the end.”



Chapter 20: La Copa De La Void Deck

Lindsay Longan blew her whistle to begin the second half.

Trump continued to dominate proceedings, but were not able to get past a very determined Aizat in defence. One particularly well-timed challenge by the captain allowed Fandi to finally gain steady possession ten minutes into the second half.

Harris received the ball, and passed ahead to Ron. He had to sprint to receive the ball ahead of his marker, Tomyam Cruise the Thai kickboxer, who leapt into the air in a flying kick. Fortunately, Ron ducked in time, and the kick missed his head. It was dangerous play, but Lindsay Longan waved play-on.

“Good! Good!” cackled Lord Oldermat from the sidelines.

However, Tomyam quickly recovered and gave chase. Seeing this, Harris dribbled towards the Trump goal, showing the kickboxer a clean set of heels. He heard Ron’s voice calling his name, and sure enough, Ron was making a quick, unmarked run towards goal at the other side of the pitch. With the outside of his right foot, Harris curled in a cross towards his best friend, who scored with a simple tap in.

They did not celebrate, but rushed back to their side of the pitch for the restart. Three—one, Trump still in the lead.

The Trump team quickly reorganised, this time parking three defenders in front of their goalkeeper, while Double-D played the role of lone attacker.

This bore instant results—every Fandi attack was thwarted in its final phase, as Aizat, Harris and Ron kept running into meaty walls of Trump towers.

The clock ticked. Every kick of the ball thudded against the silence of every non-Trump supporter in the stands. Were they witnessing the slow murder of Harris bin Potter, and their surrender to the rule of Lord Oldermat?

And then it happened. Harris received the ball in midfield, swiveled past Juice Jenner, and played a one-two off Ron. The quick turn of play found Harris one-on-one with the goalkeeper, who rushed out to narrow Harris' shooting options.

Harris feigned a lob, which made the goalkeeper jump upwards to block the shot that never came. He then shimmied to the right before giving a low shot that lodged itself into the bottom corner of the net. Three-two.

The Trump team responded by trying their tactic from the first half. Harris received the ball in midfield from Aizat. Then came the familiar sensation of being lifted into the air. This time, Aizat recovered in time to make a last-ditch tackle against Double-D.

At the restart, Aizat tried to play it long directly to Ron, but the towering Juice Jenner leapt and met the ball with his head before it could reach Ron. Harris received the loose ball and passed it to Aizat.

Further up the pitch, Ron cried, "Go to Malaysia, Harris!"

Harris' eyes met Aizat's. The latter nodded subtly. Harris broke away to the left wing. Juice Jenner, confused by this movement, chose to follow Aizat instead. Aizat feigned a long pass to Ron, but dragged his right foot back and delivered a pinpoint left foot pass to Harris. He flew down the left wing, deep into his opponent's half. He looked up, searching for Ron's red hair. The Fandi striker was loitering unmarked at the edge of the penalty area. Then, just as he was about to send in a cross, Tomyam Cruise leapt into a flying kick that hit Harris right in the face.

The boy collapsed, his entire face erupting in sharp, throbbing pain. Wincing through it, Harris got up and barged into the Thai fighter's back. Tomyam Cruise fell to the floor and the ball went loose. But Lindsay Longan was blowing her whistle. "Foul against Fandi House!" she shrieked. "Free kick to Trump." Harris wanted to protest, but Aizat was there, telling him to keep his head in the game.

"We only have a minute left," Aizat said to his midfielder, pointing at the clock. True enough, underneath the score of Trump 3—Fandi 2, the timer read 1.03.

One minute and three seconds. Harris ran back to midfield.

One minute and two seconds.

Now, fifty-nine seconds stood between Harris and death by Lord Oldermat. Sejook Panas took the free kick. He lifted it high into the air, aiming for Double-D. But Aizat leapt to head it away. The ball bounced beyond the reach of Juice Jenner, and neatly into Ron's path. Harris sprinted along with his best friend. Up ahead, Tomyam Cruise stood imperiously. Behind them, the Trump players were tracking back. Juice Jenner had his arms outstretched to reach Ron—a clear foul in football, but clearly okay with Lindsay Longan as referee.

Tomyam Cruise sprinted in Ron's direction and leapt, ready to give yet another flying kick. Ron saw this coming—and ran headlong into the kick. Tomyam Cruise's studs connected with Ron's temples. Harris heard the sickening crunch as contact was made. But while everyone was focused on the kick to the head, Ron had passed the ball to Harris, who suddenly found himself one-on-one with the goalkeeper. Harris rolled the ball between the legs of the onrushing keeper, and into the goal.

There it was, the equaliser.

The non-Trump portion of the crowd went wild. They were singing the names of the Fandi players. There was jubilant dancing. People from the three non-Trump houses were hugging one another, regardless of allegiance, skin colour, grades, CCAs, grandmothers, grandfathers, what cars their parents drove, their social media following, the houses they lived in and whether they would queue for five hours to get a Hello Kitty doll.

Meanwhile, the Trump team were yelling and blaming one another for letting go of a comfortable three-goal lead.

In the air-conditioned VIP box, Lord Oldermat was clearly livid. Although the glass was soundproof, Harris could see his parents' murderer yelling at Justout Beaver, gesticulating angrily in the direction of the pitch. The dark wizard even slapped the singer around several times for good measure. Justout seemed as though he was about to retaliate, but then his shoulders sagged and he left the VIP box. It gave Harris a sense of pleasure, seeing his nemesis like that, but he knew that he still had a football game to win.

Trump House kicked off again. Now, with every touch of the ball, three-quarters of the students booed and jeered. Nevertheless, they had two very skilful, very quick adults on their team. Double-D, his expression growing uglier with every

minute of the game, passed the ball to Sejook Panas, who, against the whistles and boos, lost his composure and tried a shot from over ten metres out. The ball went wide of goal.

Harris glanced at the clock. Thirty-nine seconds. Oliver Newton John-Wood played the ball short to Aizat. Three Trump players swamped towards him, a move that made their growing desperation obvious. Aizat brought the ball from left foot to right and then back to his left, looking for a gap between his onrushing opponents. But there was none. He dribbled the ball back towards his goal. His options were rapidly diminishing.

Harris dropped down the pitch, looking to support his captain. He called for the ball. But there was no angle for Aizat to make his pass. Sejook Panas dived in two-footed for the tackle. Just before the Trump player's studs connected with Aizat, however, the Fandi captain lifted the ball over the Korean player and leapt over the tackle. He then pushed the ball towards Harris, only for it to strike Double-D's shin.

Double-D Malfay grinned, and, being no more than three metres out from goal, prepared to strike it. His foot connected with the ball emphatically...

The ball rose, only to hit Harris, who had dived in to block Double-D's shot.

Twenty seconds.

The ball went loose. Oliver Newton John-Wood rushed out of his place between the posts to clear the ball, punting the ball upfield towards Ron, who brought it under control with his chest. Harris ran up to support his friend. However, all the Trump players were also converging on Ron—the one closest to him, Tomyam Cruise the Thai fighter, was leaping off the ground, aiming a veritable, authentic muay Thai flying kick at the eleven-year-old's back.

Seventeen seconds.

Just as Ron laid the ball off to Harris, the Thai fighter's studs connected with Ron's back, and the boy crumpled to the floor with an indignant shout of pain. As expected, Lindsay Longan did not call for a foul.

But Harris had the ball.

Thirteen seconds. He knew Trump players were gaining on him, so Harris dribbled the ball forward. His mind raced faster than his feet—he needed to score. He must score. It was life and death. There were things far, far greater than him at stake. Now Tomyam Cruise was running at him, barking threats, rabid, unleashed. The Trump defender slid at Harris, but with a clever shimmy, the eleven-year-old boy dribbled past the grown man.

Nine seconds. Harris was one-on-one with the Trump keeper.

He positioned his body so he could side-foot the ball beyond the keeper's reach into goal. Just as he was about to kick, however, he felt a tug on his jersey. It was Double-D Malfay, wearing an ugly scowl only a blind mother could love. Harris tried to step up to shoot, but Double-D was pulling him back too much. Most of the crowd were booing Double-D's act. Trump House was cheering even louder. Lord Oldermat, far away in the VIP box, was visibly gloating.

Six seconds.

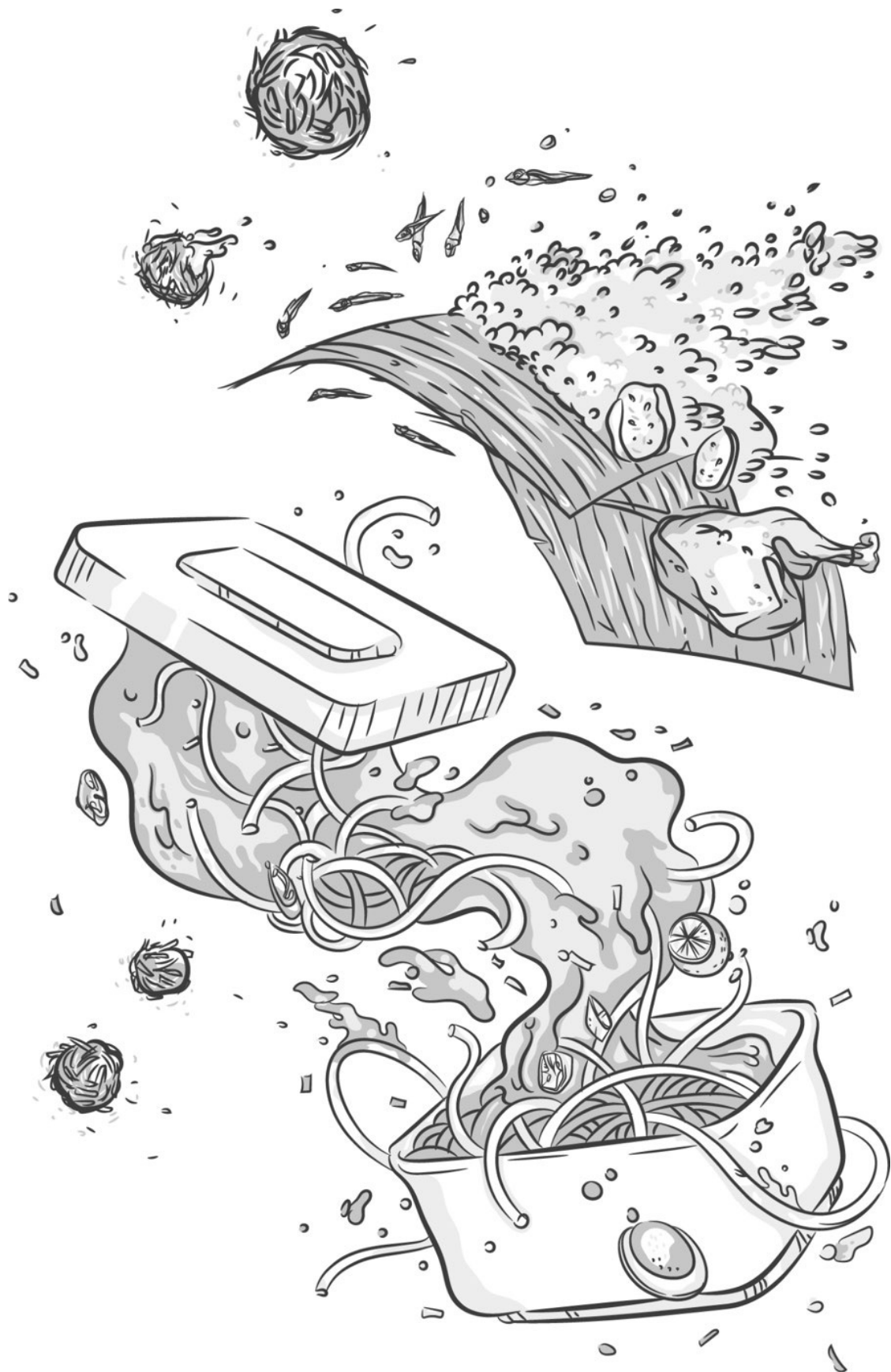
Harris leaned back and stretched out his arms, such that Malfay ended up fully pulling off Harris' jersey. Now topless, the orphan boy wizard connected his feet with the ball, and shot for the far bottom corner of the goalpost. The ball skidded on the surface of the pitch. The Trump goalkeeper dived...

But could not reach the ball.

The ball skidded into the bottom corner of the goal, and then bulged into the net.

Four–three to Fandi House.

Above the players, the timer wound down to zero. Lindsay Longan blew her whistle, signalling that the final void deck football game of the school year had come to an end. One could almost go deaf, such was the roar that erupted in the arena.



Chapter 21: Magic. Mayhem. Soup.

A voice rang out across the arena. Even in the triumphant huddle of his teammates, Harris could hear it. The voice, magically amplified, said, “As principal of this proud institution, I hereby declare Fandi House to be this year’s champions.”

The school, as one, turned and watched Pakcik Dollah stepping onto the pitch, a golden F-shaped trophy in his hand. F for football. F for Fictory. Streaming onto the pitch behind him were Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut and the staff of Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, with the exception of Professor Pooh Quimak.

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut rushed to her two friends, and the three of them embraced.

“What took you so long?” Ron asked her.

“Lord Oldermat had Pakcik Dollah and the teachers trapped!”

“How?”

“It’s a truly despicable act,” said Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, the abject memory showing its strains upon her face. “The evil wizard put Pakcik Dollah in a circular room...and told him to relek one corner!”³³

Harris buried his face in his hands in horror, while Ron muttered, “Sial lah, that’s just horrible!”

“He’s just been spinning round and round for almost twenty-four hours trying to find a corner,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut continued, “and we couldn’t stop him.”

“Couldn’t he just...you know...not have done it?” Harris asked.

“Not relek in a corner? How can you even think that?” Ron was incensed.

Having lived most of his life in a kitchen sink cabinet, Harris had had more than his fill of corners. “Well...”

But the very person who had suffered chronic round-room displacement was speaking, and he was speaking energetically, triumphantly. Said Pakcik Dollah proudly, “Can I have the brave players of Fandi House, who have endured despicable fouls and unfair refereeing, who have beaten the odds, to become champions in this year’s House Cup, to come up?”

The school cheered again. Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut stepped aside as Harris, Ron and their teammates lined up before their Headmaster.

High above them, disagreement was unfolding.

“Stop this!” Lord Oldermat’s magically amplified voice filled the arena. As one, the entire school turned to the raving dark lord in the VIP box. He climbed down to the stands and onto the pitch, all the while shaking a fist at Pakcik Dollah and Harris. “Stop this at once! You may have won your petty poor man’s sport, but I will win the day!”

“You lost, Oldermat,” cried Harris.

“Yeah,” Ron added. “Fair and uh...”

“Square, Ron. Square!”

“Yes, that!”

“And you promised to return magic to the people you wrongly stole it from!” Harris cried defiantly.

“Yes, that too!”

“Stole it?” Lord Oldermat spat. “Stole it? I took it from the undeserving!”

“But you promised!” Ron whimpered.

“Oh, yes,” Lord Oldermat responded sarcastically, “throughout my journey, I’ve shown myself to be the kind of person who upheld my promises. Are you really that stupid, boy? No, don’t answer that. The time for talking and bargaining and petty games of void deck football is over. Now, the time has come for me to destroy all of you.”

“No,” Harris said, standing his ground. “Return Singapore’s magic to its rightful owners.”

The students from Fandi, Halimah and Haikel houses drew their satay sticks and pointed them towards Lord Oldermat, Justout Beaver, Lindsay Longan and Oldermat’s black-clad henchmen.

“Never!” cried Lord Oldermat.

“You promised!” Harris said.

Oldermat brandished his wand, thick and gnarled in contrast to the satay sticks pointed at him. “This is what’s going to happen instead. I’m going to cast Chan Mali Chan here—and all of you who know the lyrics to the godawful song will die. The rest of you can join me as we create a new, more powerful magical society—one deserving of the blessings we have inside our blood!”

“That’s not going to happen!” Pakcik Dollah made a gesture to Hamid behind him. The half-giant left the grounds, and came back shortly after, dragging a bound and gagged Justout Beaver. “You don’t have as many allies as you did, my friend.”

The Trump House students were clearly starting to rethink their allegiances. Some were sneaking out of the void deck football pitch.

“Cowards!” Lord Oldermat cursed like an old-timey villain. “You are undeserving,” he shouted at the children.

“Let them go!” Pakcik Dollah said to the evil wizard. “They sense it. Don’t you?”

“Sense what?”

“That you have lost. You have lost from the very beginning. You see, Oldermat, you are in the age of wokayness.”

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut stepped up to the Headmaster and whispered into his ear.

“Wokeness,” Pakcik Dollah corrected himself. “You are in the age of wokeness. And your racist ideas are as appreciated here as an Irishman appreciates Sober

Sundays. More importantly, you are severely outnumbered and...out-footed.”

“Out-footed? What are you raving about you old lunatic? You might have the numbers but—”

Without fanfare or entrance theme music, the Food Fight Club had lined up along the pitch. They held a Tupperware each, that ubiquitous benchmark of the well-fed, middle-class consumer in polite society.

Or at least, it might be at any other time. On that day, it was the ammo crate of liberation. In each Tupperware was a steaming hot serving of Malay food—mi rebus, nasi lemak, satay gravy, ayam penyet and the like.

There was an almighty cry, and food began flying towards Oldermat. He deflected them with ease, but the amount of food thrown was growing and growing. Seeing this, the remaining Trump students quietly, sneakily left the arena. Sticking to a cause is one thing, getting Malay food on their designer shoes was another.

Harris went to Tyler, who congratulated him on a game well played before handing Harris a Tupperware of ondeh-ondeh.³⁴

Ondeh-ondeh in hand, Harris strode towards the sidelines, and flung it at his intended target. Oldermat was too busy fending off numerous attacks to see that singular ball of glutinous rice and its speedy trajectory towards his face...

Oldermat turned, and SPLAT! The ondeh-ondeh connected with his nose, lodged itself into one of his nostrils and split apart. Oven-hot liquid gula melaka shot up his nose. A little dribbled down towards his upper lip.

Having spent many days against Professor Pooh Quimak’s pants, Lord Oldermat could definitely tolerate the pain. The damage, however, was undeniable.

A silence swept the arena as the Food Fight Club stopped throwing precious food. Everyone present gaped slack-jawed at Lord Oldermat, brown liquid palm sugar dripping from his face. He huffed out the single ondeh stuck in his nose.

The dark wizard raised his wand.

Everyone braced themselves to cast protective spells.

But then, Lord Oldermat fell to his knees and began crying. “I can feel it in my brains, the gula melaka.” He let out a godawful cry and clutched at his bald head. For good measure, Harris threw another ondeh at him. It hit Lord Oldermat in the temple, before bouncing to the floor. Some of those gathered began to chuckle.

“Stop,” he said dejectedly.

Pakcik Dollah, who had been standing aside and enjoying the show, said, “Do you surrender, Oldermat?”

“Yes. Just...just,” he sobbed, “don’t throw any more Malay food at me. It’s demeaning!”

Pakcik Dollah sneered angrily at the dark wizard. “I cannot stand how racist you are! You might as well be French.”

“Now, give these people back their magic,” Harris said with conviction.

The dark lord raised his satay stick, and pointed it at himself. “Majulah,” he recited. A sparkling cloud of pure magical energy rose from his chest. It rose high into the air, cackling with blue sparks, and grew larger and larger, until it was the size of a skyscraper. Then, it broke into thousands of smaller clouds, and they flew towards all those who had lost their magic after listening to the music by Justout Beaver.

Oldermat waved his satay stick again, and in the blink of an eye, the dark wizard had teleported somewhere far, far away.

There were cries of triumph and songs of victory. But nothing was more beautiful than the look of realisation on Hamid’s face.

“Sial lah!” Hamid cried, touching his throat. “Sial! Siol! Jamban! Kambing! Aku orang melayu!” And upon saying these words, he stayed corporeal, solid and very, very visible. “I can be as Malay as I want to be! Apa-apa aku kata dalam Bahasa Melayu, tak perlu nota kaki lah!”³⁵

33 The colloquial pronunciation of “relax”. To “relax in a corner” is mostly associated with Malay people, who are purported to be more languid and

carefree than most other groups and therefore, have a greater propensity to find corners in which to relek.

34 Ondeh-ondoh, or “klepon” in Javanese, is a glutinous rice ball dessert coated with flakes of coconut shavings and filled with gula melaka (palm sugar). The singular form of ondeh-ondoh is simply “ondoh”. The plural form, depending on your definition of plural, can either be “ondoh-ondoh”, “ondehs”, “gay ondeh”, “transgender ondeh”, “multi-ethnic ondeh” and so on(deh) and so forth.

35 What Hamid said here was, “Whatever I’m saying in Malay will not require footnotes!”



Chapter 22: The Final Chapter...Or Is It? Yes, It Is.

If there's any word that can be used to describe Harris bin Potter that morning, it would not be "well-rested". Well, neither would it be "scaly" or "six-legged" or "British". As his peers in the Fandi House dorm rooms scurried back and forth, hastily packing and preparing to leave for their year-end holidays, Harris lay in his bed, his eyes gazing at the ceiling as it had been since he collapsed there late the night before.

Eventually, he dragged himself out of bed and trudged, still in his pyjamas, out to the corridors of his school. Fellow students rushed past him, obviously trying to catch the earliest Magic MRT home. Subconsciously, his feet were gravitating towards the seventh room of the seventh floor of the...

His stomach growled.

Harris bin Potter changed course, and made his way to the Great Hall. Very few students were there, as most were having hurried breakfasts before rushing back to their families. Among them were Ron and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut, chatting over a bowl of cereal each.

"Good morning, guys," Harris muttered as he sat down.

"Good morning, Harris," his friends returned chirpily.

Ron took out his satay stick, and with a smug smile, magically conjured a bowl of cereal for his friend. Harris and Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut rejoiced.

As they ate they discussed the triumphs of the day before.

"You know," Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut said. "You've bested Oldermat twice now. I won't be surprised if they write a book about your life."

"A book? Why would I want a book written about my life? I don't think the public would want to read a book about me."

Ron seemed genuinely excited by the prospect. "You don't have to be models."

“Modest,” Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut corrected him.

Ron pressed on. “Think about it, Harris!” he said. “The fame! The money! The girls!”

“I’m not interested in any of those things! I’m not interested in girls.”

“You can’t say things like that if the book is written in Singapore, Harris.”

“Ron, come on!” Harris said with a laugh. “It’s a book, not a rap record deal. And besides, I don’t think my life is interesting enough for chapters to be written about it. If anybody reads a book about me to the final chapter, there must be something really, really wrong with them, right? Right? Ha ha ha right? Right? I mean, down to the final chapter. Who in their right mind would read a book about me to its final chapter? I bet the final chapter will just be about us eating cereal after defeating Oldermat.”

The three continued chewing.

Her-Aku-Punya-Lutut was the first to break the silence. “I can’t wait to come back for our second year.”

Harris thought, for the first time in a long time, of going back to the Palliterations. “Same here,” he said.

Ron chimed in, “I bet there’ll be adventures and magic and more monsters to defeat!”

Harris sighed. He was sure there would be.

After they finished their cereal, they went back to their empty dorms and packed up.

Before he left for the Magic MRT station, Harris dropped by Hamid’s office to find the janitor tending to his wounds with bandages and antiseptic and satay stick.

“Ah, Harris, apa khabar?”³⁶

“I’m good, Hamid. Yesterday was crazy, huh?”

“Yes, it was, but you saved the day, Harris! I am so proud of you, siol!”

“Thank you, Hamid. How does it feel saying ‘siol’?”

“Amazing...siol!” The boy and oversized man exchanged warm hugs.

“I just want to say thank you for picking me up from the Palliterations last year. It changed my life.”

“For the better ah, I’m hoping, siol,” he said in a crisp Malay accent one would never hear from somebody who attended an Ivy League school.

“For the better, definitely.”

“Are you going to be okay, Harris?”

The boy nodded and smiled at the person who first introduced him to the magical world, a world where he was appreciated, a world far away from the Palliterations.

The two hugged again and said their goodbyes.

Harris then headed to the office at the end of the vestibule next to the Great Hall. At its entrance, the Merlion was practising rave dance moves.

“What you want?” asked the Merlion irritably, stopping its jig when it saw the boy approach.

“I want to see Pakcik Dollah.”

The Merlion seemed very inconvenienced by this, but he nevertheless slid aside. Harris climbed the spiral staircase behind the painting, and knocked on the door at the top of the stairs.

“Come in, Harris” came Pakcik Dollah’s cheery voice.

The boy did so. Pakcik Dollah was hunched over his table, perusing a yellowed book intently.

“I just wanted to say goodbye,” Harris said.

The Headmaster turned his eyes from the book to the student before him. A kind smile brightened the deeply tanned, wrinkled face. "I'll see you in the next school year."

"How about Oldermat?"

"He'll be back. But I'm confident we can beat him again. You're only in your first year and you've already defeated him twice, Harris."

"By blind luck, honestly," Harris admitted.

"There is no such thing as blind luck. A blind duck perhaps, but the intangible idea of luck to possess eyes is—"

"I mean, I was just lucky. It was not talent or magical ability that won the day," Harris clarified.

"Oh, yes, definitely, definitely. You're 100 per cent correct about that. No talent or magical ability whatsoever. But we'll make sure you're ready next time. I don't think Oldermat will allow his plans to hinge on a void deck football game next time around." Pakcik Dollah rose and walked over to Harris. "Are you still thinking about the Mirror of Tatnap?"

"Not so much," the boy lied.

"Good," said Pakcik Dollah. "I intend to have it destroyed."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"Are we playing the alliteration game now? Well, whoop, whee, whoaaa!" The look on Harris' face told the Headmaster that alliteration was not what the boy was going for. "Well, now that Professor Quimak will spend his days in magic prison, I don't see the need to keep the damned thing here."

Harris chose his words carefully. "There might be use for it."

The wizened Headmaster raised a thin eyebrow. "Like?"

The boy could not answer. The truth was, he would give anything just to look at his parents again, even if it meant he had to stare at their puckered—

“You’re thinking of your parents, aren’t you?”

Furtively, he nodded.

“It can drive a person insane, only seeing what they desire but never being able to engage with it. It’s like the opposite of a flatulence. Flatulence, you can’t help but engage in, but you can never see.” The Headmaster’s piercing stare softened. “They’re always with you, Harris. Your parents. You can’t see them, but they’re there.”

“Like flatulence?”

“Like flatulence.”

The boy’s thoughts eventually returned to the mirror. “How did it even end up here?”

“It belonged to Professor Pooh Quimak. He requested it be kept in the castle, asked for me to forbid students from accessing it. On hindsight, I think it’s for him to have a conversation with Oldermat without having to twist his body.”

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“Professor Quimak? We’re putting him away for a long time, don’t you worry, my dear boy.” Pakcik Dollah rested a hand on Harris’ shoulder. “We’ve put Oldermat out of business for quite a while. When he strikes again, we’ll be ready. Now, go get that MRT or you’ll reach your uncle’s after sundown.”

“Yes. Well.” Harris did not enjoy the prospect of returning to the Palliterations. “I guess I’ll be going, then. Goodbye, Pakcik Dollah.”

“Goodbye, Harris bin Potter. We will meet again, sooner than you think.”



The sun was well descending from its loftiest heights by the time Harris reached Tampines. He hadn't been there for nearly a year, but it was like muscle memory, crossing roads and walking through void decks to reach the Palliterations' block.

As soon as he got out of the lift, he could hear voices from his aunt and uncle's unit. And the voices were all saying the strangest thing: "Cock! Cock!"

"Cock, cock, cock!" Harris heard it softly at first. But as he progressed down the corridor, it grew louder, clearer and unmistakable. "Cock! Cock! Cock! Cock, cock!"

Harris was now one unit away from his aunt and uncle's place, and he could identify the voices. It was Dada, Cik Petom and Uncle Pandir. But they sounded like a broken record, like their mouths and vocal chords were working independent of their brains. But then again, that pretty much described the Palliterations.

"Cock! Cock, cock, cock!"

"Cock?"

Finally, Harris reached that familiar gate and door. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Hamid had broken the door down in his attempt to bring Harris to Hog-Tak-Halal-What School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He knocked.

Dada answered it, still muttering, "Cock, cock, cock, cock," and as he realised that it was Harris, he exclaimed in a high-pitched, excited voice, "Kau!"³⁷

"I'm back!" Harris said, smiling at his cousin. Dada returned an uneasy smile, as did his aunt and uncle, from the living room couch.

"What were you guys doing just now?" Harris asked.

"Oh, we were talking cock until kau come home."

36 Malay: "What's the news?" literally, but colloquially it's a manner of asking,

“How are you?” Not to be confused with “Apakah bar?”, which has the same pronunciation, but means “What is a bar?”

37 A colloquial abbreviation of the Malay word “engkau” which, in English, translates to “you”. It is pronounced the same way as “cow”.

About the Author



Suffian Hakim is the author of *The Minorities*. The Straits Times has called him “undoubtedly one of the most whimsical, creative and unpretentious young voices in Singapore literature”. Suffian is currently a writer at Big 3 Media. He was previously a regional content lead at media agency GroupM and has written for television shows such as *Random Island* and *The Noose*, and publications *Esquire* and *August Man*.

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Muhammad Izdi is an artist who has been part of several international exhibitions, including in Lyon, Lille and Yangon, among other cities. He participated in the Dena Foundation Artist Residency Program in Paris and had his first solo show *The Brown Dabble* at Chan + Hori Contemporary in Singapore. Izdi graduated from Singapore Polytechnic in 2007, and later joined the Singapore Art Museum as senior designer, where he was heavily involved in branding, marketing and advertising, and larger-scale onsite exhibition graphics for the museum's galleries and external venues. Find him at www.muhammad-izdi.com and on Instagram at [@lepaklukis](https://www.instagram.com/lepaklukis).

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